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A Model House and a House’s Model: Reexamining Frank Lloyd Wright’s House on the Mesa Project

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The Premise

Standard histories of twentieth-century architecture are filled with familiar buildings and projects that have been fitted by succeeding generations of academics into neat, linear narratives. But suppose that such works have more to reveal. If one of the most important legacies of postmodernism has been academics’ willingness to question time-worn assumptions and readings, then even the most familiar project deserves renewed scrutiny. The case in point for this article is Frank Lloyd Wright’s House on the Mesa, which although one of the architect’s most celebrated unbuilt projects, has received relatively scant scholarly attention. The story of this remarkable project bears reexamining.

The basic facts surrounding the House on the Mesa are well known. Conceived for the Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 Modern Architecture: International Exhibition, the project subsequently reappeared in Wright’s Broadacre City as a model for upper-class housing. The design incorporated the concrete textile-block system that Wright devised during the 1920s, but it was modified to include vast expanses of glass. Outwardly, the project’s horizontal profile, made more emphatic by flat, cantilevered rooflines, echoed the work of Wright’s European rivals, even as it mimicked the stepped Colorado landscape that was its intended location. Inside, Wright provided generous living spaces, including multiple bedrooms with private baths, a servants’ wing, a swimming pool, and a five-car garage. The project’s luxurious scale is all the more striking given the depression then pummeling the American economy and Wright’s own precarious financial situation at the time.

Less widely known are the circumstances regarding the House on the Mesa’s initial conception and evolving purpose within the architect’s larger body of work. This article reexamines this familiar project on the basis of surviving drawings, photographs, and correspondence in the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, the Museum of Modern Art Archives, and other repositories, including a newly discovered letter to critic Lewis Mumford at the University of Pennsylvania. Furthermore, the article attempts to place the project within the critical debate surrounding the introduction of European modernism to the United States.

The Clients

Wright conceived the House on the Mesa during a crucial juncture in his career (Figure 1). He had achieved national prominence in the first decade of the twentieth century with his innovative designs for a series of suburban houses and a handful of public buildings. The publication of a German monograph of his work in 1910—the so-called Wasmuth Portfolio—cemented his reputation as a modernist in Europe. Over the next two decades, however, Wright’s personal and professional life unraveled, beginning with the breakup of his first marriage and culminating with a defaulted mortgage on Taliesin, the estate he had designed and constructed earlier near his birthplace in southern Wis-
Wisconsin. He secured only a few major commissions during these years, most notably those for the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (ca. 1912–23) and a group of houses in southern California. Following his marriage to Olgivanna Hinzenberg in 1928, Wright started a new and highly productive phase of his career, although actual commissions remained scarce through the middle years of the Depression. Ever resourceful, he turned to writing and lecturing to help supplement his meager income and to stave off his creditors.

Wright designed the House on the Mesa without a specific patron in hand, but scholar Robert L. Sweeney first identified the project with Denver businessman George E. Cranmer via surviving correspondence. When the Denver Art Museum invited the architect to deliver the Cooke-Daniels Lectures in December 1930, Cranmer, who was then president of the board of trustees, acted as co-host along with his wife, Jean; Wright and Olgivanna Wright stayed for the duration of their trip at the Cranmers’ elegant home in the upcoming East Side neighborhood of Hilltop (Figure 2). Wright deliberately provoked controversy with his tart pronouncement that a recently selected, traditional design for the new city hall belonged to a “past century,” which the Denver Post parlayed into a front-page story.

Underscoring the title of his first lecture, “The Disappearing Cave,” he sought to make clear the distinctions between the old way of building and the new. “To a large extent we are still dwelling in the decorated cave and have not come out into the sunshine,” he told his audience. “Architecture of the future will mean extensive use of glass, simplification of form, freedom of space, comfort and utility.” The Post’s editors voiced their agreement with the architect in the next day’s issue.

On a personal level, the Wrights’ stay with the Cranmers was a great success. Both couples were known for their appreciation of music as well as art, but they shared other interests, too. The Cranmers, who had three children, balanced their involvement with the arts with a love of the outdoors. They entertained houseguests frequently, and they were known to be generous, vivacious, and open-minded. The last trait is especially relevant when recalling the lingering scent of scandal that enveloped the Wrights, who, prior to their marriage, had cohabited for several years and conceived a child, Iovanna, together. "I can’t begin to tell you how much we both enjoyed both of you in your home," Wright remarked in a letter to George Cranmer in late December. “Denver will always mean your hospitality.”

Figure 1 Frank Lloyd Wright, ca. 1930

Figure 2 Right to left: George E. Cranmer, Jean C. Cranmer, and daughter Sylvia Cranmer, ca. 1945
Wright also requested that Cranmer send him a copy of the Post "ridicule."  

Although Wright did not communicate anything more specific to his hosts, he seems to have been impressed by their house and its surroundings. At first glance, the Cranmers' Renaissance revival–style house seems imposing but otherwise unremarkable—part of a "past century," to quote the architect—yet a closer inspection reveals some subtler details (Figure 3). The fashionable Denver architect Jacques Benedict designed the twenty-two-room house in 1917, and its somewhat idiosyncratic appearance owes a great deal to his training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.  

The plan of the house is axial but not symmetrical, and despite the presence of historicizing—even Mannerist—details, the one-and-one-half-story main elevation is strikingly modern in its horizontality and irregularity. The front door is balanced asymmetrically by an open loggia to the left and by a pair of heavily ornamented windows to the right. A vaulted ceiling in the house’s living room provides an elegant and acoustically enhanced setting for musical gatherings.  

Perhaps more inspiring to Wright was the house’s site. Cranmer deliberately picked the highest point in the Hilltop neighborhood for his new house. Located at 200 Cherry Street, it overlooks Mountain View Park and, to the distant west, the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains; the spectacular setting seemed to underscore rather serendipitously the theme of Wright’s museum talk (Figure 4).  

Denver landscape architect S. R. DeBoer consulted on the design of the house’s grounds, which included stables and a renowned flower garden. A swimming pool was added behind the house in 1922, much to the delight of the Cranmer children and their neighborhood playmates. Through political connections, George Cranmer had succeeded in pressuring the city council in 1923 to close the stretch of Cherry Street fronting his house to outside traffic, effectively creating the illusion of a country estate by linking the park visually to his personal property (Figure 5). Moreover, since the neighborhood was somewhat slow to develop, snatches of open prairie could be glimpsed among the existing houses.  

How quickly the idea for a modern house in a similar hilltop setting germinated in Wright’s mind cannot be determined, but he had been entranced with the open vistas of the American West and the design possibilities they presented since he had first traveled to California more than a decade earlier. During the late 1920s, Wright had made increasingly regular automobile trips between Taliesin and Arizona, where he had several projects in the planning phases or under construction. While driving on long stretches of western highways, Wright had undoubtedly studied the possibilities of designing buildings for the astonishingly varied landscapes—so different from his native Midwest—that were visible through his windshield (Figure 6).
Unfortunately, the Arizona projects yielded very little income for the Wrights, and financial pressures weighed heavily on them as 1930 waned and the Depression deepened. Faced for the second time with the possible loss of Taliesin, the architect impulsively mailed a package to the Cranmers that contained a number of Japanese prints from his esteemed collection. Wright was counting on the Cranmers, whose considerable wealth was largely unaffected by the economic downturn, to purchase the prints for themselves or for the Denver Art Museum. Yet Wright did not make the direness of his financial situation immediately plain, and he awkwardly thrust George Cranmer into the role of his agent. Cranmer, somewhat reluctantly, managed to sell part of the collection for more than $500 before returning the remainder to Wright by June 1931. Jean Cranmer, in fact, purchased one of the Hiroshige prints in the group. “I am sorry to have been so insistent and to have thrown myself on you as a ‘prospect,’” Wright apologized in a letter to George Cranmer that same month. “It is the penalty a man like you pays for his fine qualities where men like me are concerned, in such circumstances as mine.” Following this embarrassing episode, it is unlikely that Wright would have entertained the notion of seeking a residential commission from the Cranmers directly. Fortunately, another opportunity had already presented itself.

The Model

Earlier that year, MoMA had extended an invitation to Wright to participate in a group exhibition of modern architecture scheduled for winter 1932. Officially titled Modern Architecture: International Exhibition, the show begot the well-known moniker “International Style” and increased public awareness of modern architecture in Europe and the United States. The story of the exhibition has been told at length elsewhere, but it is useful to recount here the tale in abbreviated form from Wright’s perspective. It is almost unnecessary to say that MoMA’s invitation stirred feelings of deep ambivalence in Wright. For some time, the architectural press had ostracized him for his creative independence, even as the popular press had sensationalized his prior marital woes. Moreover, although Wright had been acclaimed as a pioneering modernist in Europe since the publication of the Wasmuth Portfolio, he received only sporadic attention in the United States, most notably from Lewis Mumford, a newly established cultural critic who became his friend and ally, and from Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., a rising young architectural historian.

Figure 5 Map of east Denver, showing location of Cranmer House (no. 145 on map) and Mountain View (now Cranmer) Park

Figure 6 Frank Lloyd Wright and Olgivanna Wright with daughters Svetlana Wright and Iovanna Wright, Ocatillo Camp, Chandler, Arizona, 1929
(Figures 7, 8). Wright undoubtedly realized that recognition from the museum would boost his career, yet for one who regarded himself as peerless, a group showing was distasteful and the arbitrary creation of a "style" even more so.

From the initial planning stages, the show reflected the European biases of its co-curators Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, who was then an emerging figure in architectural circles and MoMA’s organization (Figure 9). Both men were advocates of what they viewed as a definitive modern style characterized by spatial innovation, advanced materials, and planar surfaces unmarred by ornament. Yet while they came to view Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, J. J. P. Oud, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as the European avatars of this style, they were less sure of who the American counterparts might be. Wright was essential to the exhibition, not only to bolster the somewhat weak American section but also to present an instantly recognizable name to the museum-going public. On an ideological plane, moreover, Wright was an essential protagonist in the narrative they wished to relate: a progenitor of modern architecture whose innovations inspired a younger generation of Europeans. As Johnson himself admitted to Wright, a "show without you would be like Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark." Mumford, it should be noted, consulted on the exhibition’s housing section and acted informally as an intermediary between Wright and the curators when tensions flared over the next several months. The exhibition was to be accompanied by a catalogue edited and written by Hitchcock and Johnson with a contribution by Mumford, as well as a book, The International Style, coauthored by Hitchcock and Johnson.

Johnson, in his official role of director of the exhibition, first corresponded with Wright in early April 1931, requesting that Wright, like the other participating architects, be "represented by a model." Johnson also indicated that he was sending Wright a copy of a promotional pamphlet for the show. Titled Built to Live In, the pamphlet listed some of the architects who would eventually be invited to exhibit; in addition to Wright, these included Raymond Hood, Richard Neutra, and the partnerships of Howe and Lescace and the Bowman Brothers from the U.S., and Le Corbusier from France. Illustrations of works by all of the aforementioned architects except for the Bowman Brothers were included in the pamphlet along with other examples by Gropius, Ernst May, Mies, and Oud. After expressing some initial reluctance to Johnson about the exhibition, Wright was at work with his assistants on an unidentified model by early June. By July, a tentative list of models by the major European architects had been compiled, but the Americans’ contributions, including Wright’s, were still being determined. "It is impossible just now to say what kind of a model Frank Lloyd Wright would contribute," exhibition secretary Alan R. Blackburn wrote to the Swiss-American architect William Lescace, who along with his American-born partner George Howe was preparing his own model for the show.

Wright continued work on the unidentified model during the summer and fall, although it was interrupted in October by a voyage the architect took to Rio de Janeiro that lasted several weeks. Since Wright’s usual working
method was to create drawings before building a model, a series of sketches, elevations, plans, and exterior and interior perspectives may be dated approximately to fall 1931. One perspective diagram is labeled “Cranmer House” and shows the vanishing point and coordinates for one of the exterior perspective views (Figure 10). In November, Wright's secretary, Karl E. Jensen, wrote to Johnson about models for a theater and a residence nearing completion. Despite Jensen's and Johnson's repeated requests, Wright did not send photographs of the model, plans, or other information that would have assisted the curators in their decision making. Johnson wrote the architect on 14 December: “With regards to the model, I should prefer in general the house to the theatre, but as I do not know what either of them looks like, it is difficult to decide. It would help enormously if you would send the plans even without elevations, so that I would be enabled to make a choice. The model absolutely must leave Taliesin before December 30th.”

By early January 1932, with the exhibition set to open in just over a month and the catalogue deadline imminent, Johnson was still in the dark about the model or models. Wright's procrastination was quickly building into a minor crisis, since a photograph of a model was to be included in the publication along with a short essay that would parallel the sections devoted to the other participating architects. Mention is again made by Wright of two models in a draft of a telegram dated

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Figure 9 Philip Johnson, 18 January 1933. Photograph by Carl van Vechten

Figure 10 Frank Lloyd Wright, House on the Mesa project, ca. fall 1931, perspective diagram
2 January and three models—a theater, a gas station, and a “Home on the Mesa”—in a letter fragment dated 5 January. Wright described the third model as follows: “There is the model for the ‘Home on the Mesa’, near Denver. Block-shell and copper in the main, and without windows in the conventional sense and with cross ventilation at the floors. The living-room on the roof. Size of the model—7’8” x 3’10”, extreme height 15”. Tilts up so elevation may be seen in perspective.” Johnson wired Wright several days later, indicating that “we would prefer the Denver house,” and that the “catalogue goes finally to press January eighteenth.” Wright once again missed this deadline, prompting Johnson to wire him that day with the request that photographs be taken of the eighteenth model and plans sent immediately. Wright responded by cable later that same day. Photographs of the “models,” he wrote, were being forwarded by special delivery, but he added somewhat ominously that he had “misapprehended [the] character of [the] exhibition.”

The full force of Wright’s wrath was expressed in a letter to Johnson written the next day in which the architect threatened to withdraw from the show. Specifically, Wright was incensed to learn that Hood and Neutra, architects with whom he had longstanding professional disagreements, were to be included in the American section. Having received *Built to Live In* in April of the previous year, Wright should long have been aware of the names of his American co-exhibitors. It may be, however, that this information had conveniently slipped his mind until the exhibition opening drew nearer and his own apprehension about his critical treatment by the curators grew stronger.

On the same day, Wright wrote a letter to Mumford, explaining his predicament and enclosing a copy of his letter to Johnson. Wright also included in this mailing an 8-x-10-inch photograph of the model as seen from an oblique angle with wood scraps littering the worktable beneath it (Figure 11). On the photograph’s verso, Wright wrote the following letter in longhand, in which he refers to the project by its familiar title for the first time (Figure 12):

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Dear Lewis –

This is the new model of the “House on the Mesa” (near Denver) intended for the show. The ninth type (Block Shell) developed with a new sense of construction. The overhung (cantilever beams built exposed as features of the architecture) flat-slab suspending screens of glass and copper. The living room and breakfast room set in a roof garden with a sheltered
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Figure 11 Wright, House on the Mesa project, model, ca. January 1932, view of garden façade showing worktable
pool attached. The cantilever is here architecture direct and simple. Except for doors the openings are all in the offsets of the wall-screens (windy climate) very hot sometimes. The walls start on the floor slabs so that a similar horizontal opening is at the floor level just inside the outside wall. This to allow circulation of air over the floor[,] which is the way to keep cool when it is hot weather.

Near the bottom of the letter, Wright made two sketches, which diagram the unusual openings in the model’s walls and windows and correspond roughly to one of the detail drawings prepared for the project (Figure 13; see Figure 22). Mumford immediately telegraphed the architect, pleading with him to remain in the show. With great reluctance, Wright acquiesced, and he notified Johnson accordingly. After a few days’ reflection, Mumford again wrote to Wright, praising the model as a “new triumph,” and “an altogether brilliant and satisfying piece of work.”

The exact date when Wright shipped the “models” cannot be pinpointed. On 22 January, he indicated to Johnson that “three models [were] going forward in [a] few days.” Elated at this news, Johnson wired that he had “received photographs of model” and that he was “holding space in catalogue for plans.” Not long afterward, Wright evidently sent the models of the “Home on the Mesa,” and possibly the gas station, to MoMA, but confused over just what Johnson proposed to exhibit, Wright wrote the curator on 1 February that he would “hold the new theatre here until we hear from you.”

Figure 12. Letter from Wright to Lewis Mumford (19 January 1932), written on verso of photograph depicting model of the House on the Mesa project.

Figure 13. Detail of Figure 12 showing pencil sketches by Wright at bottom of letter.
model finally arrived, Johnson, who was clearly ecstatic, wired Wright: “MUCH EXCITEMENT OVER THE HOUSE ON THE MESA. A MOST MAGNIFICENT PROJECT. I HOPE YOU WILL BE ABLE TO BUILD IT.” The model was installed in time for the exhibition’s opening on 9 February, but Johnson collapsed from exhaustion and missed the event.

The Exhibition

Johnson designed the show’s installation, the uniformity of which, as Terence Riley noted, was “the very model of stylistic ‘discipline’ that the curators urged on American architects.” The House on the Mesa model formed the centerpiece of the section dedicated to Wright, and its large scale—7’8” x 3’10” x 15”—ensured that viewers would pause and take note of it (Figure 14). Wright, who had developed a strong interest in exhibition design around this time, created a special base for the model with supports at only two corners (Figure 15). The base both reinforced the dramatic cantilevering of the model itself and distinguished it from the other models on display. The other models’ bases, Riley observed, were hidden by “ill-conceived ‘skirts’ of the same fabric as the wall covering”—a lone sour note in an exhibition design that was otherwise well orchestrated. Although the House on the Mesa’s site plan was canted below the model for the viewer’s reference, none of the other drawings for the project were presented. This was in keeping with the uniformity of Johnson’s scheme. The model was in turn surrounded by enlarged photographs of Wright’s various projects, including the Frederick C. Robie House in Chicago (1908–10), Taliesin (1911–25), the Mrs. George Madison Millard House in Pasadena (1923), and the Richard Lloyd Jones House in Tulsa (1928–31).

Within the larger gallery, the model competed favorably with models by several of Wright’s European counterparts: Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Mies’s Tugendhat House, and Oud’s House Project for Pinehurst, North Carolina. In their stark, rectilinear qualities, all the models showed a passing formal resemblance, and all were country villas with servants’ quarters. As Riley stated, Wright’s project “fit very neatly into the curators’ attitude toward domestic luxury.” Yet it alone stretched the limits of the viewer’s imagination. Although the site plan indicated a suburban setting, the model’s sweeping horizontality suggested something much larger: it was in essence a metaphor for the vast openness of the West itself, just as a generation earlier the Prairie houses had been for the Midwest.

The exhibition catalogue featured a photograph of the model and an accompanying site or “lot” plan; except for cropping to remove all evidence of the worktable debris, the photograph is identical to the one Wright sent to Mumford (Figure 16; see Figure 11). The site plan showed the
house to be oriented to the southeast, and it contained the following legend: “HOUSE ON THE MESA/NINTH GENERAL TYPE[,] OVERHUNG FLAT SLAB CONSTRUCTION IN BLOCK SHELL SHEET COPPER AND GLASS[,] COPPER AND GLASS SCREENS SUSPENDED FROM SLABS[,] HORIZONTAL OPENINGS IN OFFSETS OF SCREENS[,] ENCLOSING CURTAINS WOVEN OF METAL THREADS[,] COST $125,000.”\(^7^4\) Wright also provided a key to the house’s numerous rooms.

In the publication, Hitchcock’s essay on Wright appeared first, both in deference to the architect’s age—Wright was sixty-four-years-old at the time and the eldest in the group of exhibitors—and in keeping with the chronology the curators imposed on the material, with Wright positioned as a herald for the others.\(^7^5\) In a separate short text, Hitchcock examined the House on the Mesa model, praising its technical audacity but criticizing its extended plan as lacking the unity required of a functioning residence. He wrote:

The House on the Mesa sums up a lifetime of experience with the designing of American houses and converges with the line of development of the modern house in Europe. No European architect has been bolder in the use of cantilevering in domes-
tic architecture or more drastic in the introduction of whole walls of glass. The concrete block shell system is combined with the cantilevered slab roof on isolated supports to produce an architecture as weightless and non-massive as that of Le Corbusier. But in the extremely extended articulation of the plan by which the house ceases to be one unit . . . Wright continues the line of his early developments and reacts sharply against the classical centralization and unification which has dominated most of the best modern house designs in Europe . . .

. . . Beside the classical formalism of the houses of Oud, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe . . . this latest house of Wright’s is a striking aesthetic statement of romantic expansiveness.\(^7^6\)

Predictably, Hitchcock’s “surface” assessment irritated Wright. In a letter to Hitchcock written in late February, the architect listed all the mistakes he had found in the catalogue essay, although he referred only obliquely to the shorter piece concerning the model: “You do not get inside architecture as an organic expression of the nature and character of materials with infinite possibilities of expansion—but remain a highly intelligent observer of effects with a very definite and aristocratic taste of your own.”\(^7^7\) Johnson’s grasp of the model was no less superficial. “I should also like
Figure 16  Wright, House on the Mesa project, photographs of model and site or "lot" plan. Originally published in Modern Architecture: International Exhibition (New York, 1932), 55
to have a more detailed discussion about the plan of the House on the Mesa[,] which I am not sure that I fully understand yet,” Johnson wrote the architect on 16 February, “although the general conception of the house I find extraordinarily beautiful.”

The Project

Given the complex design of the House on the Mesa, the limited time frame for the advanced study of the model, and the exclusion of all the drawings save for the site plan from the exhibition, Hitchcock’s, Johnson’s, and Mumford’s tentative responses to the project are perhaps understandable. Clearly Wright intended the house to be a supremely luxurious project; its high cost of $125,000 a rebuke to the national economic downturn and what he perceived as an impoverished European modernism. The architect’s own unstable finances might have prompted him to dream at a larger scale than he would have otherwise, although it is noteworthy that during the previous decade such residential designs as the Aline Barnsdall House (ca. 1916–21) and the Charles E. Ennis House (1924), both in Los Angeles, and the aforementioned Lloyd Jones House (1929) had all grown in scale to accommodate the requirements of an automobile-centered suburban lifestyle.

A composite understanding of the House on the Mesa can be assembled from an analysis of surviving images and documents, most of which date from fall 1931 to spring 1932. These include the photographs of the model; the site plan and its legend; the other plans, elevations, perspectives, and detail drawings; unpublished notes subsequently drafted to accompany the drawings; and the architect’s brief descriptions in his letters to Johnson and Mumford. In addition, there are two relevant telegrams exchanged with a potential client, which date from spring 1933.

According to the unpublished notes, Wright envisioned a luxury residence on a level, multi-acre, wooded site that also contained a lake. Although the notes do not mention a specific elevation, his use of the term “mesa” was both generally evocative of the West and specifically tied to the “table-lands” found adjacent to river valleys in this region of the U.S. Thus, the setting Wright described corresponds in spirit to the Cranmers’ Hilltop neighborhood in east Denver, which rises dramatically from the north bank of Cherry Creek. With no intended irony, he identified the project’s anticipated clients as “a moderately wealthy American family of considerable culture—master, mistress and four children, cook and two maids, chauffeur and gardener.” The parallel to the Cranmers’ domestic situation was not exact, when one recalls that the couple had three children. In a subsequent passage, Wright elaborates further on the house’s connection with the landscape:

The sweep of the mesa with the magnificent views of the Rocky Mountains is felt in the arrangement and, as a foil, comes the sheltered bathing pool pouring into the “lake-for-swimming,” its surrounding glass planes sequestered by the surrounding masses of trees.

The house itself, as a whole, becomes a complete garden, open or sheltered at will. A good time place . . . it has what might truthfully be called twentieth-century style.

The architect’s reference to “twentieth-century style” may have a dual meaning: a retort to both Hitchcock and Johnson’s “International Style” as well as the American public’s embrace of various romantic-revival styles for their “dream” houses.

Despite Wright’s evocative description of the setting, identifying the specific site on which he intended the house to be built poses a difficult puzzle for the scholar. The correspondence with the Cranmers would seem to indicate a location near their existing house, adjacent to or possibly even in Mountain View Park, as Sweeney postulated. Yet although the neighborhood is elevated, it was never heavily wooded. There is no lake immediately nearby and natural sources of water are scarce. Furthermore, Wright’s ground plan for the house, which shows it paralleling an unnamed road, is situated 60 degrees from due north, in violation of the neighborhood’s cardinal street grid (Figure 17; see Figure 5). This orients the garden façade of the house toward the sun-drenched southeast but away from the celebrated mountains to the west and north. For these reasons, Sweeney, who visited and studied the site extensively, speculated that the house “could not have been built in Denver at all,” although this assumption may be incorrect. As discussed below, a mountain backdrop for the house would have enhanced the design considerably.

The puzzle is further complicated by an exchange of telegrams more than twenty years after the project was first conceived. In April 1953, M. H. “Bud” Robineau, a Denver businessman and tennis enthusiast who was acquainted with the Cranmers, telegraphed the architect: “FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT WE HAVE PURCHASED THE SITE ON CRANNER [sic] PARK DENVER FOR WHICH MRS JEAN CRANNER [sic] ADVISES YOU PREPARED PLANS AND MODEL[,] DO YOU STILL HAVE THESE AND ARE YOU INTERESTED IN SUBMITTING TO US AND IF SO ON WHAT TERMS[,] PLEASE WIRE COLLECT.” Within a few days, Wright responded enthusiastically: “House eminently suitable. We have only original sketches. Model
Figure 17 Wright, House on the Mesa project, lot plan

destroyed. Would be glad to see the House on the Mesa a reality. We leave here for Wisconsin May 3rd. Perhaps you can view the original drawings thereafter at your convenience. My best to Jean Cranmer." Since there is no other surviving correspondence between Wright and Robineau, the matter was presumably dropped. Perhaps the potential cost of the house in postwar dollars may have exceeded what Robineau was willing to spend. Whatever may have transpired, Robineau built a house the following year at 181 Dexter Street, on a lot directly southeast of the Cranmers'. Its design by architect Joe Lott, Jr., is vaguely Wright-inspired.

Although neither the model nor the drawings provide insight into the broader environment for the project, they do reveal a great deal about the architect's vision of a luxurious, modern residence. The House on the Mesa is a sprawling structure, with wings that extend dramatically toward the garden, swimming pool, and lake, which takes on the appearance of a rectangular reflecting pool. The house's walls are constructed of the concrete-block shell system that Wright developed during the 1920s, and its reinforced-concrete slab roofs are suspended from boldly cantilevered and tapered roof flanges that project from the chimney cores and from selected piers. The northwest, or street, façade presents a defensive appearance to outsiders, its massive walls pierced only by the motor entrance, enclosed terraces and balconies, and small windows (Figures 18, 19). The upper level, however, sheathed in glass and shaped like an inverted ziggurat, appears to float above the masonry walls of the lower level. Presuming a mountain orientation for this façade, Wright created a carefully framed vantage point for the house's occupants above the tree line of the surrounding landscape.

On the house's southeast side facing the garden, swimming pool, and lake, the principal rooms are linked by a lengthy "sun-loggia" illuminated by skylights and a glass curtain wall (Figure 20). In the public rooms, glass screens are suspended from copper extensions of the cantilevered roof slabs in the manner of fabric curtains (Figure 21). Under the overhangs, the windowpanes are stepped so that the horizontal panes open to allow the passage of fresh air while blocking strong winds. At floor level, small, glass-covered openings at the base of the walls cool the floor slabs and, together with the other openings, provide cross-ventilation (Figure 22). Draperies woven from metal threads could be drawn to shield the interiors from the sun's glare when necessary. The dialogue between indoors and outdoors continues with a semi-enclosed garden placed to the west and an open motor court to the east. In a bold scenographic stroke, Wright positioned the swimming pool as a kind of elevated stage above the sunken lake, with the
house’s upper level serving as a backdrop and a perforated copper awning—cantilevered outward a remarkable 40 feet—providing shade (Figure 23). Except for a fountain jet set atop pyramidal steps at the swimming pool’s edge, the lines of the house are resolutely horizontal, but staggered in the manner of a rocky mesa. If one further imagines the Rocky Mountains rising behind the roofline of the house, the integration of Wright’s architecture with its setting is completed.

The house’s F-shaped plan is one of the most expansive and complex that Wright devised (Figures 24, 25; see Figure 17). As one approaches the residence—ideally by automobile—one sees the long side of the house placed parallel to the street and set back around 50 feet. The driveway entrance is located to the left, and it passes beneath a bridge supported by double colonnades to a rectangular motor court, which forms the first perpendicular wing. On the left side is a five-bay garage flanked by living quarters for both a chauffer and a gardener; maids’ rooms are positioned on the right side adjacent to the house. One enters the house’s main block through a side entrance beneath the bridge, which acts as a porte-cochère. The dramatic “sun-loggia”
Figure 20  Wright, House on the Mesa project, perspective drawing of southeast, or garden, façade

Figure 21  Wright, House on the Mesa project, interior perspective drawing of living room

Figure 22  Wright, House on the Mesa project, detail drawing of window openings
extends the length of house, which overlooks the garden, swimming pool, and lake on the one side and screens a series of public and private rooms on the other. These include the dining room, guest bedrooms, children’s bedrooms, and the owners’ bedrooms with their own semi-enclosed garden, complete with small fountain.

Midway along the main volume, Wright inserted a second perpendicular wing. At the intersection, there is a formal double staircase whose landing adjoins a balcony overlooking the street. The wing contains a billiard room on its lower level and a living room on its upper level. Across a roof terrace from the living room—which would proffer a view of the mountains no matter where they lay—there is a combined breakfast/tearoom. A mezzanine kitchen vertically connects the breakfast/tearoom with the lower-level dining room. The kitchen, in turn, has its own roof terrace, which leads to the servants’ quarters. Wright referred to standardization of materials, and more than once, he emphasized the house’s fireproof construction, perhaps an acknowledgment of the seasonal wildfires common in this part of Colorado.92

The Context

Where does the House on the Mesa fit within the development of Wright’s formal vocabulary? In his study Wright in Hollywood, Sweeney carefully situated the 1931 project near the end of Wright’s concrete-block experiments begun almost a decade earlier. It is useful to provide a brief overview of this groundbreaking scholarship. From 1923 on, Wright referred to his evolving system as “textile block construction,” a play on traditional fiber weaving that pointed to both its structural and decorative potential.93 The system developed quickly from applied decoration to—double-shell arrangements—what Sweeney has termed “mono-material construction.”94 As seen in Wright’s well-known California houses and in several unbuilt projects in California and Arizona, the system variously interwove smooth blocks with geometrically patterned relief blocks and even perforated and glazed blocks. The system culminated in Wright’s project for San Marcos-in-the-Desert (1928), a luxury resort intended for Chandler, Arizona, where walls, floors, and even ceilings were to be constructed of the textile blocks.95

In its extended plan and horizontal massing, the House on the Mesa is most closely related to its immediate predecessor, the Lloyd Jones House, also known as Westhope (Figure 26). Wright designed the house in 1928–31 for his cousin, Richard Lloyd Jones, who had purchased a sloping four-acre site on the edge of Tulsa with expansive views of the Arkansas River valley’s western ridge of hills.96 The relationship between Lloyd Jones and Wright became increasingly strained, however, as the project progressed. Wright, for example, originally conceived the plan as a diagonal grid punctuated by hexagons, but Lloyd Jones strongly objected to what he perceived as potentially limited views from the interior. This prompted the architect to revise the plan on a more conventional, rectangular grid, roughly in the shape of the letter J, which provides for a generous sequence of discrete public and private spaces. A five-car garage and adjoining servants’ quarters are separated from the main house by a landscaped court with swimming pool.

The elevations of the Lloyd Jones House are simultaneously among the most austere and varied that Wright ever conceived (Figure 27). According to Sweeney, six types of textile blocks are incorporated into the house’s construction, and they are stacked into vertical piers that alternate with vertical casement windows.97 Patterned blocks appear only as decorative fasciae, window screens, and ventilation...
Figure 24  Wright, House on the Mesa project, first-floor plan

Figure 25  Wright, House on the Mesa project, second-floor plan
In a reversion from the San Marcos-in-the-Desert project, Wright, perhaps realizing the tensile limitations of the textile blocks, embedded reinforced-concrete slabs in the horizontal roofs and floors, which vary in height. The uneven profile is somewhat akin to a fortress or even a compacted urban skyline, especially when considering the house’s large scale. Given the project’s size and complexity, it is not surprising that it ran over budget, leaving Lloyd Jones disgruntled. One can easily imagine how—freed from a familial client’s financial oversight and confronted with a dramatically elevated landscape—Wright was inspired to redistribute the various elements of the Lloyd Jones House to even greater effect in the House on the Mesa. Whereas the former appears huddled on the prairie landscape, the latter seems poised for flight.

If the Lloyd Jones House indicates a turning point in Wright’s textile block system, then the House on the Mesa represents a more pronounced retreat. As Sweeney noted, “concrete block seems almost incidental to the scheme.” Plain blocks were to be used throughout the house, and patterned blocks were to be employed sparingly. The role of pattern was seemingly usurped by the copper screens and the metal-thread curtains. For example, the perspective view of the living room interior reveals patterned blocks framing the opening to the swimming pool, and these are juxtaposed with the patterned draperies (see Figure 21).

As with the Lloyd Jones House, Wright proposed using reinforced-concrete slabs for the roofs, but this time suspending them beneath cantilevered beams. The architect had been using cantilevering as both an expressive and structural device since his Prairie house years, but it assumed an even more prominent position in such key projects of the 1920s as the National Life Insurance Company Building Project in Chicago (1924–25) and the St. Mark’s-
in-the-Bouwerie Towers Project in New York (1927–31). In the House on the Mesa, the cantilevering of both the concrete roof slabs and the copper screens would have created a sense of unparalleled weightlessness, less “architecture direct and simple”—to quote from Wright’s letter to Mumford—than architecture dependent on the most tenuous balancing of materials imaginable. Wright would continue to explore the structural limits of the cantilever to great critical acclaim in the Edgar J. Kaufmann House (Fallingwater), near Mill Run, Pennsylvania (1934–37), and the S. C. Johnson & Son Research Laboratory Tower in Racine (1943–50).

The fenestration proposed for the House on the Mesa also diverges from the earlier textile block projects, which variously incorporated conventional casement sashes, glass inset within perforated concrete, glass block, and glass curtain walls. The House on the Mesa’s suspended glass window walls, with their inwardly stepped, up-tilting sashes, were more daring than anything Wright had then proposed or built, and they were intended to provide a kind of natural air-conditioning for the interior. He would again propose these unconventional sashes in residential projects for Stanley Marcus in Dallas (1934–36) and Stuart Haldorn in Carmel, California (1945), and they were eventually incorporated into the house he designed for Mrs. Clinton Walker, also in Carmel (1948).101

Sometime before April 1932, Wright developed the Conventional House Project as a direct outgrowth of the House on the Mesa (Figures 28, 29).102 In the unpublished notes for the project, he identified the potential client as the “well-to-do American family paying $12,500 to $15,000 for a home: master and mistress, several children, one servant, and a Ford or two.”103 Although considerably smaller and less expensive than the $125,000 estimate for the House on the Mesa, the Conventional House was still clearly beyond the means of typical middle-class buyers. Nevertheless, Wright imagined that the two projects might coexist harmoniously as immediate neighbors. “This house would be worthy of a place, notwithstanding its more simple extent, next door to the House on the Mesa,” the architect wrote. “Quality and character are more important in such association, in our country, than extent.”104 Unfortunately, Wright did not provide details on how the two buildings might have appeared together.

Although Sweeney connected aspects of the Conventional House’s plan and construction to two earlier projects, there are several features that are filtered, albeit reduced in scale, from the House on the Mesa.105 These include a central living room with hearth, a staircase with landing, numerous terraces, and—separated from the main house—a two-car garage with attached servant’s room. A small bedroom suite occupies the upper level. Unlike the House on the Mesa, the Conventional House is cardinally oriented, with its main façade facing east. Judiciously placed plantings were to create a quasi-forecourt that would surround and protect a small reflecting pool. That the house and garage have blank end walls and extend the full width of the 100-foot lot suggests the project could have been multiplied into a townhouse grouping.

Wright specified fireproof single-shell, textile block construction for Conventional House’s walls instead of the usual double-shell, with insets at the door and window openings that act as buttresses.106 Decorated blocks were to be used primarily for the lintels, creating a friezelike effect, and once again reinforced-concrete slabs were to be used for the floors and roofs, which were to be moderately cantilevered. Yet, in a departure from the House on the Mesa, casement windows, some of which were room height, were to be set in standard, vertical planes, preserving the sense of spaciousness but eliminating the novel airflow. Standardization of materials is again indicated in the description.107 “In this scheme . . . there is a general lightness, openness and relation to the garden, combined with privacy when desired, that is modern and that makes natural the quiet simplicity of the early ‘Colonial’ that is now merely artificial,” Wright concluded.108 Regarding this quip, Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer noted that the architect was bristling against the preference of affluent Americans at the time for “eclectic styles dredged up from the past.”109 Earlier, Wright had even designed a modern house project that he bluntly named “A Colonial Equivalent” (1928).

Yet another puzzle surrounding the House on the Mesa and its overall relationship to the textile block system concerns the numerical labels “ninth type,” “ninth general type,” and “type nine” that Wright variously affixed to the project (see Figures 17, 22).110 This would seem to place the House on the Mesa at the end of a numbered sequence that includes nearly all of the major California and Arizona textile block buildings and projects as well as the Lloyd Jones House.111 If this is the case, then the Conventional House Project would logically be the “tenth type” had Wright continued his numerical labeling. Although the architect would again use textile block construction in some later residential designs and at Florida Southern College (begun in 1938), after the House on the Mesa he increasingly shifted his attention to the possibilities afforded by other construction systems.112

Having examined the House on the Mesa and its context within Wright’s oeuvre, one wonders whether the project should be labeled International Style, given the larger
Figure 28 Wright, Conventional House Project, 1932, site plan, ca. winter–spring 1932

Figure 29 Conventional House Project, elevations, ca. winter–spring 1932
parameters of MoMA's *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* and the introduction of European modernism to the United States. Several Wright scholars have answered this question in the negative, a position that the surviving evidence supports. Anthony Alofsin called the project an "ideal foil" to the other works on display, adding that the "size of the house and the powerful shifting of masses created a dramatic interplay of solids and voids—an elegance that made the economical intentions of the International Style appear pallid." Sweeney, who has written most extensively and authoritatively about the project, also views the project in opposition to the International Style: "House on the Mesa is not an International Style building, but it is a calculated response to the work of the European modernists and to their visual ideals—lightness of construction; use of industrial materials; and smooth, planar surfaces." Yet one also wonders exactly how "calculated" Wright's response could have been. At no point during the planning of the exhibition was the architect privy to the other architects’ projects, although it should be recalled that the text and photographic illustrations of *Built to Live In* comprised a kind of exhibition preview. Wright, of course, knew firsthand many of Hood's and Neutra's existing buildings in New York and California. Moreover, Wright kept abreast of his European rivals’ pursuits through the professional journals, all the while plotting his own "comeback" on their turf. In 1930, a year before Johnson’s invitation to show at MoMA, Wright had organized an exhibition of his own work that opened at Princeton University and then traveled to several American and European cities. Much to the architect's dismay, as Kathryn Smith observed, the earlier exhibition had elicited a particularly mixed critical reception in Germany, where so many of his younger competitors practiced. As for stylistic similarities between the designs of Wright and his European competitors, the strongest connections can be made to Mies. Robert Twombly noted a relationship between the German architect’s 1922 Brick Country House project and both Wright’s Lloyd Jones House and the House on the Mesa. Wright may have seen Mies’s project when it was published in 1928 in the French journal *Cahiers d’Art.* It was subsequently represented in the exhibition catalogue, but not the show itself, by photographic reproductions of a perspective and plan (Figure 30). Astute readers of the catalogue might have been struck by both projects’ irregular geometric massing and extended open plans. Furthermore, the House on the Mesa’s use of a rectangular pool—although magnified by Wright to the status of a lake—may have been inspired by the example of Mies’s Barcelona Pavilion (1929). The Barcelona Pavilion was, in fact, used as the first illustration in *Built to Live In,* and it was subsequently featured both in the exhibition and its catalogue. That Wright was particularly interested in Mies's work is indicated by a casual remark to Johnson: “Some day let's persuade Mies to get rid of those damned little steel posts that look so dangerous and interfering in his lovely designs.” Of course, an equally convincing argument can be made that Mies was himself influenced by illustrations of Wright’s earlier Prairie house plans reproduced in the *Wasmuth Portfolio.* Whatever the case, the threat of the Europeans’ stylistic ascendancy around the time of the exhibition ultimately galvanized Wright. As Neil Levine wrote: “The prospect of an International Style forced Wright to examine his own position and to articulate his approach to design in a way that clearly distinguished him from those he perceived to be his enemies. The result was a concentration and intensification of those characteristics of his work that were peculiarly his own.” Thus, the House on the Mesa can be interpreted as having only a superficial relationship with the International Style and, more integrally, as continuing the organic predilections of Wright, who disavowed the role of style at all in his work. The project’s key features—the separation of wings by function, the technical audacity of the construction, and the responsiveness of the design to its intended location—all develop out of his residential schemes of the three previous decades. It was only after the MoMA show that his architecture responded more directly to the challenge of the International Style, without ever truly embracing it. Furthermore, the social underpinnings of Wright’s residential architecture deviated widely from those of the Europeans’ designs, further undermining Hitchcock’s assessment in the catalogue that Wright’s domestic work “converges with the line of development of the modern house in Europe.” Despite numerous financial setbacks, Wright never lost faith in the capitalist system that first lifted him into professional practice. The European architects’ socialistic leanings did not interest him, especially their attempts to solve the post–World War I workers’ housing crisis through the creation of collective prototypes. Wright could identify more readily with their designs for upper-middle-class residences, such as Mies’s Tugendhat House and Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, but even in these he found the exploration of machine-age luxury wanting. One could argue that Wright was fighting a lonely battle on two fronts since on American soil he found little patronage for his larger residential schemes; his Tulsa cousin, Richard Lloyd Jones, was a notable exception. As David De Long pointed out, in the decade leading up to the house on the Mesa, “his clients—some who came to Wright, and some whom Wright pursued—tended to represent America’s rich-
The Wrights and the Cranmers had maintained an occasional correspondence since the misunderstanding over the Japanese prints, and in August 1931 Jean Cranmer had visited the Wrights at Taliesin. It is not known whether she viewed the model or any of the drawings while they were in progress. In a postscript to a letter dated 8 February 1932, Wright, knowing that the couple traveled to the East Coast regularly, mentioned that the “model of a house, a ‘contra’ inspired by our visit to yours, on the mesa, is in the New York show at the Museum of Modern Art.” By “contra,” Wright meant an “alternative” to the European house models. If indeed Wright dared hope to secure the Cranmers as clients at long last, he must have been disappointed by their polite responses. On 13 February, Jean Cranmer wrote that she wished she “might see the model of the house in the Museum of Modern Art.” He husband, who was quite content with his existing house, betrayed a rather pragmatic disregard for Wright’s ideas concerning luxury when he wrote the architect a few days later: “Jean and I were very much interested in your exhibition in New York, which you said was inspired by our situation. We have torn down the old wooden bath house at the end of the pool and expect to improve that end of the garden this spring with a new diving tower and some brick pens without roofs for our guests to change their clothes in.” On 20 February, Wright provided the last word:

Wright and the Cranmers stopped exchanging letters in the mid-1930s, around the time George Cranmer began a second career as Denver’s forceful Manager of Improve-
ments and Parks. In this capacity, he transformed the city with numerous parks and recreation areas, including the nearby Red Rocks Outdoor Amphitheater. Denver historians Thomas J. Noel and Barbara S. Norgren called Cranmer both “devious and autocratic in his city building efforts,” noting that he treated Mountain View Park “as an extension of his own front lawn.” To his neighbors’ dismay, for example, Cranmer felled trees in the park that blocked his view. Mountain View Park was renamed Cranmer Park in 1959.

The correspondence between Wright and Johnson remained testy during and after the exhibition’s run in New York. Wright again asked to withdraw from the show once it closed at the museum on 23 March, but he was eventually dissuaded from executing this threat. Almost immediately afterward, the two men sparred over the printing and distribution of an essay by Wright titled “Of Thee I Sing,” his personal and polemical response to the exhibition catalogue. In the midst of this confrontation, Wright sought once again to distill the project’s real importance to Johnson and the general public, apart from any stylistic ballyhoo, be it European modernism or American colonial-revivalism: “I am sending some plans of the home on the Mesa[,] which should be enlarged if possible so others can understand the organic simplicity of a design wherein style arises from the nature of construction. A design intended to show how machine age luxury might compare with that of the Greeks or Goths.”

As discussed above, in April 1932 Wright drafted several pages of notes in which he described the project in detail while linking it to the smaller Conventional House Project, but it is unclear whether these were ever sent to Johnson. That same month, “Of Thee I Sing” was published in full in the architectural journal Shelter (Figure 31), and offprints were distributed at the exhibition’s traveling venues. But the controversy did not end there. Angered that Johnson had rephotographed the model for publication and that an unauthorized editor’s preface had been added to the essay, Wright fired at Johnson again: “You did not respect my request regarding ‘Of Thee I Sing.’ It appears with objectionable editorial comment under an objectionable pirated photograph of the damaged model of the ‘House on the Mesa’ taken from an objectionable angle that best serves your objectionable propaganda.” The only obvious damage to the model in the Shelter photograph is the bent fountain jet; nevertheless Johnson apologized for its appearance, reassuring the architect that before “the Exhibition went to Philadelphia I had the model completely overhauled at our expense and everything made straight and fast once more.” Following the stops in Philadelphia and Hartford, but before the opening at the Sears, Roebuck and Company Department Store in Chicago, Johnson informed Wright that he had ordered the construction of a new base for the 350-pound model, since Wright’s cantilevered design “tended to warp the whole frame.” With the exhibition on view relatively near his Wisconsin home, Wright finally relented and visited it in early summer, even commenting on the “jammed crowd.”

Unimpressed, he dismissed it—with characteristic wryness—as “Johnson’s traveling ‘Punch and Judy’ for European modernism.” No photograph of the model survives from the Chicago showing, but there is an installation view from the exhibition’s next stop, the Bullock’s Wilshire Department Store in Los Angeles, in which the new, solid base can be seen (Figure 32).

The controversy abated for a while thereafter. In December 1932, Johnson approached Wright about participating in an international exhibition on modern architecture to be held in Milan. Disagreement again erupted between the two men over whether the House on the Mesa model might be released from the American tour for the Italian showing. For unknown reasons, Wright did not participate in this exhibition, and the matter of shipping the model abroad was dropped. The model was finally returned to Wright at Taliesin in October 1933 after the penultimate stop at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and it was scrapped at a later date.

Despite the unfortunate loss of the model, the House on the Mesa soon became a mainstay of Wright’s urban planning repertory. Before designing the project, Wright had envisioned a new kind of decentralized framework for urban America made possible by advances in transportation and communication, a framework that he introduced in his 1932 book The Disappearing City. The publication was not illustrated, but with the help of apprentices at the Taliesin Fellowship, the architecture school he founded at his Wisconsin estate that same year, Wright continued to develop his ideas in written and visual form. Together Wright and his students produced a series of drawings and an enormous scale model titled “Broadacre City,” the chief municipal component of a reorganized United States dubbed “Usonia.”

Many of Wright’s earlier, unbuilt projects were integrated into the overall Broadacre scheme, including the House on the Mesa, which he touted as a model, upper-income residence at one extreme of a continuum that ranged downward to the humble Usonian worker’s cottage. This was a juxtaposition of scale first suggested in the unpublished notes to the Conventional House. Many of the plans, illustrations, and models for Broadacre were assembled and published for the first time in the January 1938 issue of Architectural Forum, which was devoted entirely to Wright. A photograph of the House on the Mesa model
appeared with the following caption: “The House on the Mesa, the five-car house of the Broadacre City models, is intended to show machine age luxury at its best—as it might well compare to its great advantage with any luxury whatsoever of the past” (Figure 33).148

Wright showcased the House on the Mesa yet again in his 1958 book The Living City, publishing many of the project’s drawings for the first time and preparing two new presentation drawings that were ultimately not used (Figures 34, 35).149 Although Wright addressed the project only indirectly, the text outlines a social meritocracy in which the House on the Mesa literally represented the pinnacle of a modern individual’s success. On a more general level, the House on the Mesa becomes a metaphor for an environment of individual growth and fulfillment. The architect wrote:

Luxury . . . would enter the democratic social sense as gratification of more and more developed humane sensibility, beauty
Figure 34  House on the Mesa project, aerial perspective from northwest, 1956

Figure 35  House on the Mesa project, perspective from southeast, ca., 1956
the concern. Exuberance is beauty but not excess. Yes. Liberty is not license, exaggeration is not exuberance. Every true home should be actually bound to grow from within to dignity and spiritual significance: grow by the right concept and practice of building into a pervasive social circumstance: grow out of one's own good ground and better self into everybody's light, not in everybody's nor anybody's way. Every man's home his "castle!" No, every man's home his sphere in space—his appropriate place to live in spaciousness.150

If the Cranmers read The Living City—and, given their interest in Wright's previous publications, it is highly probable that they did—the couple would have seen the architect's drawings for their modern, idealized residence for the first time.151

The Scholars
As noted at the beginning of this article, the House on the Mesa has been scrutinized surprisingly little by scholars over the decades. It is instructive, nevertheless, to reexamine their critical opinions of the project. Hitchcock, it should be recalled, had given the project a mixed review in his essay for the 1932 exhibition catalogue Modern Architecture. Eager to make visual connections for the purposes of defining a style, he isolated Wright's work from that of the Europeans in the end by citing its "romantic expansiveness." Yet ten years later, when writing In the Nature of Materials, Hitchcock gave the project a more sympathetic reading, positioning it as a kind of antecedent to Fallingwater.152 In 1979, Twombly argued somewhat simplistically for the House on the Mesa's importance as a transition between the Prairie and Usonian residences.153 Thirteen years later, Riley re-created the entire Modern Architecture exhibition on its sixtieth anniversary at Columbia University's Arthur Ross Architectural Gallery, including a replica of the lost model, which drew the public's attention to the project once again.154 Sweeney, who wrote most extensively about the project in his 1994 book, Wright in Hollywood, deemed it "the sort of pure design possible in a climate free of pragmatic constraints."155 But Robert McCarter perhaps came closest to appreciating the project on its own merits in his 1997 survey of the architect's work: “Altogether a remarkable design, this project exhibits Wright's precision in responding to unique characteristics of climate and light quality, constructing space from a carefully selected set of materials, and forming both house and landscape in a powerful yet sensitive manner.”156

As McCarter correctly noted, the project is a fitting response to the dramatic contours and extreme climate of the American West. Unlike many of his East Coast colleagues, Wright knew firsthand the natural splendors of the Colorado Rockies, the Arizona desert, and the California coast, and he relished the challenge of designing for clients who embraced the landscape as fully as he did. The House on the Mesa is a model country house for the twentieth century, where garages shelter a small fleet of automobiles, rooms open to generous sun-drenched garden patios, and water—one of the rarest and thus one of the most luxurious of western resources—becomes the centerpiece of family life. Although Wright faced several disappointments connected with the project, most notably his failure to interest the Cranmers as clients and his wrangling with MoMA, his timing could not have been better. At a critical juncture in his career, he proved to be an architect at the height of his creative powers who reentered the modern architectural debate, characteristically, on his own terms.

Notes
1. This article was first presented in part as a lecture at the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy Annual Conference, San Francisco, Sept. 2003. For assistance in researching this topic, I would like to thank Clay Vaughan at the Hofheimer Art Library and Stuart Frazier of the Perry Library at Old Dominion University; Nancy Shelton and Scott Williams of the Art Department at Old Dominion University; Christian Larsen, Peter Reed, and Terence Riley of the Museum of Modern Art; Nancy Shawcross and John Pollock of the Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Pennsylvania; Coi Drummond-Geitner of the Denver Public Library; Mosette Broderick of the Department of Fine Arts at New York University; Ted Wihye at the Getty Research Institute; and Margo Stipe and Oscar Muñoz of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives. David G. De Long provided much-needed encouragement and input. Kathryn Smith graciously read an early draft of this essay, identifying several errors and misconceptions. I am especially grateful to Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, director of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, who has guided me patiently throughout this research project. Illustrations for the article were funded by a generous publication grant from the Office of the Dean, College of Arts and Letters, Old Dominion University.


3. So vast is the general scholarly literature on Wright that it is impossible to list the sources for his life and work with any degree of comprehensiveness; for a recent discussion of Wright's work, see Neil Levine, The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (Princeton, 1996). See also Meryle Secrest, Frank Lloyd Wright (New York, 1993).

4. Frank Lloyd Wright, Ausgeführt Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright [Berlin, 1910].


6. Telegram, Cyril Kay-Scott, director, Denver Art Museum, to Frank Lloyd Wright, 13 Nov. 1930, fiche #D007C08, Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Ariz. (hereafter FLWA); letter, Cyril Kay-Scott to Frank Lloyd Wright, 3 Dec. 1930, fiche #D007D08, FLWA. All correspondence, FLWA, is copyright ©2005 the Frank Lloyd Wright
Money to Erect Pile of Stone in Mid-Victorian Style of Nineteenth Century. Museum's board of trustees from 1930 to 1932; e-mail correspondence, Wright and Howard Van Doren Shaw (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 49.

Laura Grant, assistant to the director, Denver Art Museum, to the author, Dec. 1930, fiche #C010E07, FLWA. On the exchange of Japanese prints between Wright and Cranmer, including a summary of individual works, see Meech, Art of Japan, 224–25.

27. Telegram, George E. Cranmer to Frank Lloyd Wright, 25 Apr. 1931, fiche #C012D02, FLWA; carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to George E. Cranmer, 24 Dec. 1930, fiche #C010E07, FLWA. On the exchange of Japanese prints between Wright and Cranmer, including a summary of individual works, see Meech, Art of Japan, 224–25.

28. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to George E. Cranmer, 15 June 1931, fiche #C013B02, FLWA; Meech, Art of Japan 223.

29. The exhibition's curators, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., and Philip Johnson, coined the term "International Style" to describe the new architecture emanating largely from Western Europe, and they applied it to the title of the polemical book that accompanied the exhibition. See Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., and Philip Johnson, The International Style: Architecture Since 1922 (New York, 1932).


32. For a thorough biographical treatment of Johnson, see Franz Schulze, Philip Johnson: Life and Work (New York, 1994).


34. Letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 30 Apr. [1931], fiche #J012B08, FLWA.

35. Modern Architecture: International Exhibition (New York, 1932); Hitchcock and Johnson, International Style (which does not mention Wright).

36. Letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 1 Apr. 1931, fiche #J012B09, FLWA.

37. Ibid.

38. Philip Johnson, Built to Live In (New York, 1931).

39. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 3 June 1931, fiche #J013A01, FLWA.

40. At this stage of the exhibition's planning, Gropius was to contribute a
A MODEL HOUSE AND A HOUSE'S MODEL

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model of the Bauhaus, Mies a luxury residence, Le Corbusier a college dormitory, and Oud a house and a glass factory. Carbon copy of letter, Alan R. Blackburn, Jr., to William Lescaze, Jr., 8 July 1931, Exhibition 15, Registrar Exhibition Files, Museum of Modern Art Archives (hereafter MoMAA).


42. Wright traveled to Rio de Janeiro to judge the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse competition.

43. There are forty-one drawings of the project in the FLWA (drawings #3102.001–3102.040, 3102.053), all but two of which date from ca. fall 1931. The two in question (drawings #3102.011 and 3102.021) date from ca. 1956, when they were created for Wright's The Living City (New York, 1958) but not used for publication. According to Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, the draftsman responsible for the earlier drawings may be either Henry Klumb or Takehito Okami, who were both working for Wright at the time; e-mail correspondence, Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer to the author, 29 Jan. 2003 and 2 Sept. 2003. Perspective diagram, House on the Mesa project, drawing #3102.035, FLWA. It is not clear when the identifying inscription was written.

45. Photocopy of letter, Karl E. Jensen to Philip Johnson, 1 Nov. 1931, MoMAA. Riley asserted that the curators specifically requested that Wright design a model of a "country house" for the exhibition, but no mention of this exists in the surviving correspondence. See Riley, International Style, 48.

46. Carbon copy of letter, Alan R. Blackburn, Jr., to Frank Lloyd Wright, attn. Karl E. Jensen, 7 Nov. 1931, MoMAA; carbon copy of letter, Alan R. Blackburn, Jr., to Frank Lloyd Wright, attn. Karl E. Jensen, 18 Nov. 1931, MoMAA; carbon copy of letter, Philip Johnson to Karl E. Jensen, 27 Nov. 1931, MoMAA.

47. Carbon copy of letter, Philip Johnson to Karl E. Jensen, 14 Dec. 1931, MoMAA.

48. Draft of telegram, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 2 Jan. [1932], fiche #M027A01, FLWA; carbon copy of fragment of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 5 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027A05, FLWA. According to Riley, the other projects were most likely the New Theater Project, Woodstock, New York, 1931, and the Standardized Gas Station Project, 1932. See Riley, International Style, 57.

49. Carbon copy of fragment of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 5 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027A05, FLWA.

50. Telegram, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 8 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027A08, FLWA.

51. Telegram, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 18 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027C06, FLWA.

52. Handwritten draft of telegram, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 18 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027C08, FLWA.

53. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 19 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027D01, FLWA.

54. The disagreement with Hood stemmed from Wright's exclusion from the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago; Hood served on the commission responsible for architects' selection. See copy of Wright's letter to Raymond Hood, 3 Feb. 1931, and Hood's response, 16 Feb. 1931, Lewis Mumford Papers, Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (hereafter LMP); all published in Pfeiffer and Wojtowicz, Wright and Mumford, 99–102 (see n. 31). Neutra had been employed by Wright in California in 1924. Wright's misgivings about Neutra are recounted at length in a photocopy of a letter from Frank Lloyd Wright to Lewis Mumford, 19 Jan. 1932, LMP, published in ibid., 123–26. Photocopy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Lewis Mumford, 19 Jan. 1932, LMP. This letter and related materials have been published in full in Brooks Pfeiffer and Wojtowicz, Wright and Mumford, 123–30.

55. Handwritten letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Lewis Mumford (on verso of a photograph of the House on the Mesa model), [19 Jan. 1932], LMP, uncatalogued box. The photograph/letter was discovered among numerous uncatalogued items in the Lewis Mumford Papers, just as Pfeiffer and Wojtowicz, Wright and Mumford, was going to press and thus could not be included in that publication. It should follow Wright to Mumford, 19 Jan. 1932. The uncatalogued letter also seems to contain Wright's first written reference to the project as the "House on the Mesa." See drawing #3102.036, FLWA.


59. Handwritten draft of telegram, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 22 Jan. [1932], fiche #M027E01, FLWA.

60. Letter, Lewis Mumford to Frank Lloyd Wright, 23 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027E03, FLWA; published in Pfeiffer and Wojtowicz, Wright and Mumford, 133–34.

61. Draft of telegram, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 22 Jan. [1932], fiche #M027E01, FLWA.

62. Transcription of telegram, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 22 Jan. [1932], fiche #M027E02, FLWA.

63. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 1 Feb. 1932, fiche #M028B09, FLWA.

64. Copy of telegram, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 4 Feb. 1932, MoMAA.

65. Riley, International Style, 82 (see n. 30).

66. Ibid., 74.

67. These are the dimensions given by Wright; see carbon copy fragment of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 5 Jan. 1932, fiche #M027A05, FLWA.

68. According to Smith, Wright's involvement with the complexities of exhibition design began in earnest with the 1930 showing of his work at Princeton University. See Smith, "Show to End All Shows," 15–16 (see n. 30). Two elevations and a plan of Wright's original base survive (drawing #3102.039, FLWA).

69. Riley, International Style, 76.

70. See drawing #3102.005, FLWA.

71. Riley, International Style, 68.

72. Ibid., 72.

73. MoMA, Modern Architecture, 55 (see n. 35).

74. Ibid., 55. The published site plan corresponds to drawing #3102.005, FLWA.


77. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., 26 Feb. 1932, fiche #H015C02, FLWA.

78. Letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 16 Feb. 1932, fiche #M028E09, FLWA.

79. In addition to the forty-one surviving drawings in the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives that relate to the project, there are also fourteen photographs of the model.


81. Wright, "The House on the Mesa," 127. Only the two later views (drawings #3102.035 and 3102.036)}, FLWA.
ings #3102.011 and 3102.021, FLWA) indicate a fully detailed wooded setting for the project, in accordance with the description contained in the unpublished notes.

82. Ibid., 127.
83. Ibid., 128.
85. The initial development of the area was made possible only by the opening of the City Lateral Canal in 1885. See Bakemeier, *Hilltop Heritage*, 2-3 (see n. 10).
87. Telegram, M. H. Robineau to Frank Lloyd Wright, 20 Apr. [1953], fiche #R082D03, FLWA. For a brief biographical sketch of Robineau, see Bake #3102.008, FLWA.
88. For a more personal view of the project, see Jenkin Lloyd Jones, "A House Among the Rockies: A Brief Account of the Lloyd Jones House," Furniture Surgery (Feb. 1932), LMP; see also drawings #3102.005 and #3102.036, FLWA.
90. This measurement is based on a reading of scale markings on drawing #3102.008, FLWA.
91. Because the fountain jet is rendered in wood on the model, it resembles a flagpole.
93. The reference first appears in a project titled "Study for Block House, Textile Block Construction, Los Angeles 1920–1921" (drawing #2103.001, FLWA). Sweeney cast doubt on the early date, suggesting that it was the result of a later annotation by Wright and that early 1923 would be more accurate. See Sweeney, *Wright in Hollywood*, 7.
94. Ibid., 11.
95. Ibid., 155–57.
98. Ibid., 192.
99. Ibid., 198.
100. Ibid., 188, 197–98.
101. I am grateful to Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer for bringing these three projects to my attention.
103. Wright, "The House on the Mesa," 130.
104. Ibid., 130.
107. Ibid.
108. Ibid.
110. See handwritten letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Lewis Mumford [19 Jan. 1932], LMP; see also drawings #3102.005 and #3102.036, FLWA.
111. The textile block projects can be ordered as follows: Doheny Ranch Resort project, Beverly Hills (1923); Aline Barnsdall House project, Beverly Hills (1923); Aline Barnsdall Community Playhouse project ("Little Dipper"), Los Angeles (1923); Mrs. George Madison Millard House ("La Miniatura"), Pasadena (1923); John Storer House, Los Angeles (1923–24); Samuel Freeman House, Los Angeles (1923–24); Charles E. Ennis House, Los Angeles (1923–24); A. M. Johnson Desert Compound project, Death Valley (1924); Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity House project, Madison (1924); San Marcos-in-the-Desert project, Chandler (1928–29); Richard Lloyd Jones House, Tulsa (1928–31); and the House on the Mesa project, Denver (1932). It is not known whether Wright ever developed a numerical sequence for the textile-block projects.
115. Smith, "Show to End All Shows," 20 (see n. 30).
119. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 26 Feb. 1932, fiche #M029B03, FLWA.
120. Levine, *Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, 220 (see n. 3).
121. De Long, "Evolution of the Living City," 20 (see n. 25).
122. For an analysis of Wright's early patrons, see Eaton, *Two Chicago Architects*, 23–64 (see n. 10).
123. Letter, Rose M. Blount, secretary, Denver Art Museum, to Alan R. Blackburn, Jr., 19 Oct. 1931, MoMAA; typewritten itineraries from around June 1932 for a proposed photograph-only leg of the exhibition indicate Denver as a stop in September 1932, MoMAA.
124. Telegram, Jean C. Cranmer to Olgiavanna Wright, 12 Aug. 1931, fiche #C013C04, FLWA; carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to George E. Cranmer, 20 Feb. 1932, not numbered, FLWA.
125. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to George E. and Jean C. Cranmer, 8 Feb. 1932, fiche #C016C10, FLWA.
126. Letter, Jean C. Cranmer to Frank Lloyd Wright, 13 Feb. [1932], fiche #C016D03, FLWA.
127. Letter, George E. Cranmer to Frank Lloyd Wright, 17 Feb. 1932, fiche #C016E03, FLWA.
128. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to George E. Cranmer, 20 Feb. 1932, not numbered, FLWA.
132. Ibid., 12.
133. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 11 Feb. 1932, fiche #M028E03, FLWA.
134. Carbon copy of fragment of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 19 Feb. [1932], fiche #M029A05, FLWA; letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 25 Feb. 1932, fiche #M029B01, FLWA.
135. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 26 Feb. 1932, fiche #M029B03, FLWA.
136. Frank Lloyd Wright, "Of Thee I Sing," Shelter 2 (Apr. 1932), 10–12; Riley, *International Style*, 88 (see n. 30). At the time, Johnson held the position of associate editor for the journal; see letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 25 Feb. 1932, fiche #M029B01, FLWA.
137. Carbon copy of letter, Frank Lloyd Wright to Philip Johnson, 19 Apr. 1932, fiche #M030A10, FLWA.
138. Letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 21 Apr. 1932, fiche #M030B06, FLWA.
139. A shipping weight of 350 lbs. was given by the museum's handlers.
Letter, W. S. Budworth and Son to MoMA, Architectural Department, 6 Jan. 1933, MoMA; letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 27 May 1932, fiche #M03D01, FLWA.

140. The exhibition was held at Sears from 9 June 1932 to 8 July 1932. Letter, Charles C. Bunker to Alan R. Blackburn, Jr., 29 Mar. 1932, MoMA; Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Show Window at Macy's," repr. in Pfeiffer, ed., Collected Writings, 146 (see n. 80).

141. Wright, "In the Show Window at Macy's," 146.

142. A complete listing of the exhibition's venues may be found in Elizabeth Mock, curator of architecture, MoMA, memorandum, 26 May 1944; published as Appendix 5 in Riley, International Style, 222.

143. Letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 3 Dec. 1932, fiche #M033D01, FLWA.

144. Letter, Philip Johnson to Frank Lloyd Wright, 10 Feb. 1933, with draft of response written on same sheet by Wright, fiche #M036B05, FLWA.

145. Letter, W. S. Budworth and Son to MoMA, Architectural Department, 6 Jan. 1933, with subsequent note written next to "Large Wright" model: "removed Nov. 11 1933," MoMA. The model was returned to Wright at Taliesin following the exhibition's run at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, and before its opening at the Carpenter Art Galleries, Dartmouth College. See letter, Frederick B. Robinson, assistant to the directors, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, to Alan R. Blackburn, Jr., 24 Oct. 1933, MoMA; see also letter, Frederick B. Robinson to Elodie Courter, MoMA, 15 Nov. 1933, MoMA. Twenty years later, Wright confirmed that the model had been destroyed. See copy of telegram, Frank Lloyd Wright to M. H. Robineau, 23 Apr. 1953, fiche #R082D06, FLWA.

146. Frank Lloyd Wright, The Disappearing City (New York, 1932).

147. Frank Lloyd Wright, Living City, 207 (see n. 43).


149. See n. 43.

150. Wright, Living City, 207 (see n. 43).

151. In February 1932, Jean Cranmer wrote to the architect concerning the publication of Wright's An Autobiography: "We shall read the book with great interest and pleasure." See letter, Jean C. Cranmer to Frank Lloyd Wright, 13 Feb. [1932] (see n. 126). In April 1934, the Cranmers subscribed to Taliesin, a bimonthly serial publication launched by Wright. See handwritten emendation by Jean C. Cranmer on letter to George E. Cranmer and Jean C. Cranmer from Frank Lloyd Wright, 19 Apr. [1934], fiche #C029A08, FLWA. It is likely that the Cranmers may have seen at an earlier date the image of the model and site plan published in Modern Architecture as well as the image of the model published in the 1938 issue of Architectural Forum.

152. Hitchcock, In the Nature of Materials, illustrations and captions, 310, 311 (see n. 25).

153. Twombly, Life and Architecture, 248 (see n. 116).

154. The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art was held in the Arthur Ross Architectural Gallery, Buell Hall, Columbia University, 9 March to 2 May 1992. Terence Riley was curator of this exhibition and author of the accompanying catalogue (see n. 30).

155. Sweeney, Wright in Hollywood, 195 (see n. 2).


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