

Today, more than a half century after his death, Frank Lloyd Wright remains America's most famous architect. In a career spanning seven decades, he designed over one thousand buildings and realized over five hundred. Wright preserved most of his drawings—despite some tragic losses to fires—to form an archive that he hoped would perpetuate his architectural philosophy, first as a tool in the production of architecture in the Taliesin Fellowship, an apprenticeship program he founded in the 1930s at his studio-residences in Wisconsin and Arizona. Progressively catalogued and opened to specialists by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, the archive was jointly acquired by The Museum of Modern Art and Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University in 2012. This exhibition celebrates this pioneering collaboration and the new accessibility of the collection to both scholars and the public.

*Unpacking the Archive* refers to the monumental task of moving across the country 55,000 drawings, 300,000 sheets of correspondence, 125,000 photographs, and 2,700 manuscripts, as well as models, films, and building fragments. It also refers to the work of interpretation and the close examination of projects that in some cases have received little attention. For this exhibition, a group of scholars and a museum conservator were invited to “unpack”—to contextualize, ask questions about, and otherwise explore—an object or cluster of objects of their choosing. Their processes of discovery are recorded in short films that introduce the thematic sections.

The questions posed illuminate the complex historical periods through which Wright lived, from the late nineteenth century, marked by optimism, through the Great Depression of the 1930s, to the decades following World War II, when the United States experienced enormous demographic and economic growth. Each scholarly inquiry offers insights at once historical and contemporary in resonance, touching on issues including landscape and environmental concerns, the relationship of industry to daily life, questions of race, class, and social democracy, and the expanding power of mass media in forming reputations and opinions.