

Maura Whang

Historic Preservation Theory & Practice

Professor Jorge Otero-Pailos

December 2017

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: A Preservation Controversy in Color

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum opened its doors to the public on October 21, 1959, to much fanfare and controversy over Frank Lloyd Wright's design for the building. Today, nearly sixty years later, while the museum has joined the ranks of the most highly well-regarded and respected establishments of fine art in not just New York City, but the world, controversy still remains an active part of its story, namely through the question over its exterior and interior color. Frank Lloyd Wright approved the color of the Hollingshead "Cocoon" elastomeric vinyl plastic coating for the Guggenheim (color No. PV020-Buffer), which appears to be a yellow-buff in color. (See Figure 1.) In both draft and final versions of the building's specifications, the exterior color was specified to "be colored as approved by the Architect. Color shall be equal and similar to 'California Buff' sand finished Lithitex..." and the interior "exactly as specified as for 'Exterior Concrete' paragraph 13 above."¹ However, it doesn't take a microscope to see that the current exterior color of the museum is much lighter and whiter than the Cocoon buff. (See Figures 2-6.) This fact raises the issue of the value of the faithfulness of a restoration to the original intent of the author—at stake is the idea that buildings can pick up new cultural meanings over time, and these meanings might possibly be more important than that original intent.

¹ These Exterior and Interior Concrete Finish Notes are taken from the Specifications, Division 16, for The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. An earlier draft edition of the Specifications say the same exact thing.

Through a four-year restoration process of the Guggenheim, led by Pamela Jerome of Wank Adams Slavin Associates (WASA)/Studio A, which took place in anticipation of the museum's 50th anniversary, it came to be known that indeed the original color of this building was much darker than the brighter white that was currently being used. In fact, this color was even darker than No. PV020Buff. However, the final results of the restoration, which were unveiled in September 2008, were the culmination of not merely the intense efforts undertaken by professional conservators Integrated Conservation Resources (ICR) during the museum's most recent restoration to uncover the original exterior paint color (and which were seemingly ignored), but of the final say of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), which, on November 20, 2007, approved the color Tnemec BF 72 Platinum, an off-white or light-grey primer originally used on the exterior of the museum in 1992-93 (but amazingly not even as the finish paint color, just as a primer).²

And so, in perpetuity, it will be BF 72 that covers the exterior of the Guggenheim, a color that Wright did not intend for his final masterpiece, and which overtly disregards that vision and the technical evidence that supports that this vision has not been upheld for several decades. Can it legitimately and rightly be argued that an original color of paint is "significant historical museum fabric"? As a preservation problem, this brings up several integral philosophical issues key to the preservation field, including how values go about being assessed and weighed against each other. How can the issue of the value of the original architect's design intent versus the cultural value that a subsequent alteration acquires be resolved? Who are the key stakeholders, and how do decisions, or how *should* decisions, go about being made? What criteria should be used in such a case? Through the lens of this contentious issue regarding the color of the Guggenheim, answers to these questions may begin to

² Weiss, Norman R., Glenn Boornazian and Amanda R. Trienens, Integrated Conservation Resources, Inc. "Guggenheim Museum Exterior Color: A Note from the Paint Analysts." *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, March 2010.

surface, and perhaps there are some possible solutions for thinking about this important landmark moving forward.

To understand the controversy between giving value to the intent of the architect over the value of design changes made to the building over time (which may or may not embody the values of the client/user), it is necessary to understand exactly what Wright's design intent was for the Guggenheim. Wright was not a fan of the color white, or what he termed "white-white," the "loudest color of all."³ He especially believed the color was terrible for showing art, which is proof that he not only would not have wanted the Guggenheim to be painted white-white, but he would have found this color choice abhorrent. As he wrote in various essay drafts, which can be found in the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives at Avery Library, 'Color is such that in all nature white is sparingly used, found only as accent or finality, like the snow which is the end of life. Death. To turn any accent into background robs any color scheme of its validity and a sensitive beholder of his reason. White, the sum of all colors, is itself the strongest "color" of all and, activated by strong light, eats color like a corpse.'⁴ In one of these drafts, Wright even names the color "dead-white white wash."

Wright also insisted upon the organic nature of architecture, which should extend from the outside to the inside. The "inside and the outside" were for Wright an "experiment in the third dimension."⁵ He had every intention to apply the same color to the interior and exterior of his new museum.⁶ To use white-white on the interior of the Guggenheim as the backdrop for the art work

³ Frank Lloyd Wright, several drafts of an essay entitled "White White-Wash." Wright Foundation Archives (Avery).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Frank Lloyd Wright, letter to George Cohen, 13 Jan 1959.

would “rob any picture of its validity;” “the accents would be lost to the background and the nature of the artist’s intent disturbed or distorted.”⁷ The Guggenheim was constructed with its exterior painted the original Cocoon as Wright had intended, but this only lasted for five years before the museum was repainted. (The interiors were always painted white-white, which, Wright’s widow said, would have caused him to walk out had he seen them.)

So what was it about white-white that the Guggenheim’s representatives admired, and why would they have repainted it so soon after it was built? Why did the museum like this white-white color so much that they would choose to privilege this over the late Wright’s design? Critical to this controversy is the difficult relationship between Wright and Guggenheim Director James Johnson Sweeney. Sweeney, who lived from 1900-1986, was a former lecturer at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, and former Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art before he came to the Guggenheim. His “ideas about museum architecture did not coincide with Wright’s proposed design,”⁸ and their working relationship remained fraught throughout its tenure, the two never philosophically seeing eye to eye.

When Sweeney arrived as the curator for the Guggenheim collection, the museum commission for its new museum was in its ninth year and Wright had already established much of the design.⁹ However, Sweeney’s ideas about what a museum should *be*, were quite different than Wright’s. Wright believed that the works of art in a museum should stand out against the backdrop of the architecture in their own right, without precluding the more radical idea that the architecture was also a piece of art in

⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, several drafts of an essay entitled “The Solomon R. Guggenheim Memorial Museum: An Experiment in the Third Dimension,” Wright Foundation Archives (Avery).

⁸ Landmarks Preservation Commission, Designation List 226, LP-1774, dated 14 August 1990, p. 9.

⁹ National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 6 October 2008, p. 20.

and of itself, and therefore should also stand out on its own. The use of the natural Cocoon would ensure that the art and the architecture would not blend together. Sweeney on the other hand believed that a museum should be subservient to the art, and decidedly not like the “Archeseum”¹⁰ that Wright was proposing, a vision that reflected the unity of art and architecture.

Wright and Sweeney established no rapport in their ideas on this matter during the planning stages of the museum,¹¹ and a hint of what would come to pass at the new Guggenheim was foreshadowed at the museum’s temporary space at 1701 Fifth Avenue. Sweeney “replaced dark tones and plush fabrics with clean white surfaces. He advocated similar finishes for the rotunda of the new museum, stark white walls and artificially controlled lighting that would create a neutral environment, pragmatic rather than atmospheric...In a way Sweeney chose an arbitrary relationship between painting and buildings over a subjective one between painting and viewer.”¹²

The 2007 decision by the LPC was also hinted at in these early days of the museum, perfectly setting up the controversy of architect’s intent versus the value of changes over time. Wright and Sweeney were always of opposing minds, and although Wright never ceased trying to change Sweeney’s mind, “the curator was unyielding.”¹³ Just as in 2007, there was a power play at hand from the beginning of this building’s history between Wright’s intent and the client’s desires, which in this case were aligned with supporting the cultural value of change and meaning over time.

10 Wright referred to the Guggenheim as an “Archeseum,” a building in which to see the highest.” Frank Lloyd Wright, letter to James J. Sweeney, 5 Oct. 1955, in Guggenheim Correspondence, p. 215.

11 National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 6 October 2008, p. 20.

12 National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, October 6, 2008, pp. 20-21.

13 National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, October 6, 2008, p. 21.

Construction of the Guggenheim began in May 1956, and the ivory-colored vinyl plastic coating was applied in October, 1958, which met Wright's aspirations for this building, otherwise known to him as "My Pantheon."¹⁴ However, Wright's death on April 9, 1959, was over six months before the opening of the museum. His last visit to New York was in January 1959, and so he was never able to see his fully realized vision. Still, for five years, he was victorious in the conflict over the exterior paint color, which remained intact during that period as per the specifications.

The exterior curved walls of the Guggenheim were constructed of reinforced concrete, or gunite specifically. The rest was made of cast-in-place concrete. The museum's specifications give a list of requirements for the exterior and interior concrete. For the exterior concrete: "The second coat shall be colored as approved by the Architect. Color shall be equal and similar to 'California Buff' sand finish Lithitex as mfgd. By the Commercial Chemical Co." For the interior concrete: "All interior exposed concrete surfaces including all exposed (uninsulated) concrete walls, concrete ceilings, and including plastered dropped ceiling above tower mezzanine floor (but excluding other dropped ceiling plastered areas) shall be painted with 'Lithitex primer sealer' and finish coat of 'Lithitex sand texture' exactly as specified for 'Exterior Concrete' paragraph 13 above."¹⁵

These outer surfaces were painted the buff Cocoon, an "ivory-colored vinyl plastic skin, originally used during World War II to protect the finish on guns and airplanes, and then developed into an architectural finish with the trademark 'Cocoon.'"¹⁶ (See Figure 1.) (The original Cocoon buff color is

¹⁴ Jordy, William H. "The Encompassing Environment of Free-Form Architecture: Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum." *American Buildings and Their Architects, Volume 4: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972, p. 311.

¹⁵ Specifications for The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, as well as an earlier draft version (Avery).

¹⁶ "Guggenheim Museum Gets a Plastic Coating," *New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Oct 19, 1958; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index p. R11.

a match to Benjamin Moore HC-35.¹⁷) In a photograph shown at MoMA during the fall of 2017, as part of the show *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive*, there was an image of Wright on one of the monitor balconies while the exterior of the rotunda was being painted a tan color in the background—this proves he approved of, and lived to see applied, the original buff Cocoon.

Shortly after construction, and as early as 1964, discussions about repainting the original were taking place. The exterior color would continue to get lighter, with rehabilitations taking place up to the 2005-07 restoration. In 1968, a concrete-frame set-back addition by William Wesley Peters from Taliesin Associates took place, and the exterior was likely repainted then. In 1975, a ground-floor glazed enclosure was designed and implemented by Donald Freed Architects, and again it is likely the exterior was repainted. In 1978, Richard Meier was at the head of another renovation, which transformed the Architectural Archives into the current Aye Simon Reading Room. In 1986, Gwathmey Siegel & Associates began their series of renovations, which included the addition of the steel frame tower atop the reinforced concrete frame from the 1968 addition. This was the first intervention on the Guggenheim that was not limited to one particular area, and Gwathmey Siegel “chose to refinish the exterior of Wright’s building with an all-white, light grey colour similar to the more recent coating, which was mistakenly believed to be close to the original colour. The colour choice implemented during the 1992 work was emulated during subsequent painting campaigns.”¹⁸ The paint that was applied to the Guggenheim’s exterior in conjunction with this 1992 Gwathmey Siegel addition was documented as

¹⁷ Norman Weiss told me to go to a Benjamin Moore store and get a sample of this color, a “very typical FLW color.” The Benjamin Moore colors are used by many in the industry to describe a match.

¹⁸ Ayon, p. 52. Interestingly, Ayon qualifies this statement by saying “In an attempt to differentiate the original building from the new limestone-clad tower addition,” they went with the off-white, light-grey, but this color, BF 62, is in fact very similar to the appearance of the Indiana limestone used for the exterior of the addition. Also, it should be mentioned that Ayon was the Project Architect for the Exterior Restoration and Building Enhancement of the Guggenheim Museum, which was designed by preservation WASA/Studio A, which subsequently filed for bankruptcy in July 2015.

Tneme-Cryl Series 6 BF 62, “Neutral Gray,” was a “cool, light grey, applied as a finish over an off-white primer (BF 72, ‘Platinum’).”¹⁹ It was not like the color of the 1958 Cocoon, but more grey.²⁰

By 1980, the Guggenheim was given a landmarks designation by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, under Chairwoman Laurie Beckelman. In the LPC’s description of the building it says the “ivory-colored concrete exterior of the building comprises a long, cantilevered bridge (actually the second level) uniting the large bowl-like mass, or rotunda, of the Main Gallery to the south and a smaller mass, sometimes called the monitor, to the north.”²¹ So, it should be noted the building was landmarked with an “ivory-colored concrete exterior,” but not one specific color. The LPC also acknowledged in the Findings and Designation that “the design...synthesizes Wright’s philosophy of an ‘organic’ architecture, that is, buildings conceived and built according to the principles found in nature; that Wright unified the building’s construction method, its appearance, and its use, in accordance with his design philosophy...”²² The Guggenheim happened to be the first landmark to receive designation under the new City Charter, and was also the first Wright building to be designated in New York.²³

A temporary repainting took place in 2004, the exterior being painted yet another cool grey from Edison Coatings, similar to the BF 62, and even slightly lighter, but between 2005 and 2007, the Guggenheim underwent a major restoration in honor of the museum’s 50th anniversary. Restoration and renovation work was conducted by the architecture firm Wank Adams Slavin Associates

¹⁹ Weiss, Norman R., p. 96.

²⁰ Weiss, p. 96. During ICR’s research, they also interviewed a senior member of the Museum’s staff; according to this person Gwathmey himself was not actively involved in the color selection in 1992-93.

²¹ Landmarks Preservation Commission, Designation List 226, LP-1774, dated 14 August 1990, p. 10.

²² Landmarks Preservation Commission, Designation List 226, LP-1774, dated 14 August 1990, p. 20.

²³ New York Times article from 19 Aug 1990, “Guggenheim Museum is Designated as a Landmark.”

(WASA)/Studio A, under the leadership of Pamela Jerome. Integrated Conservation Resources (ICR) was responsible for the conservation work and the historic paint analysis, under Norman R. Weiss, Glenn Boornazian, and Amanda R. Trienens. In the Guggenheim's National Historic Register nomination, which was approved for designation on October 6, 2008, the goal of the restoration work was described: "The 2005-07 restoration is the first time since opening to the public in 1959, that the Guggenheim Museum has undergone a thorough exterior restoration program. While much of the interior of the building was rehabilitated in 1992 as part of a capital expansion project, the exterior of the building was not addressed at the time. The current restoration will provide long term repairs to the Guggenheim Museum and *is guided by the goal to preserve as much significant historical museum fabric as possible, while accomplishing necessary repairs*" (emphasis author's own).²⁴ The question arises: is the original color and design intent of the architect part of the historic fabric, and/or are the changes over time part of that fabric as well? Which of these has more value, and which should take precedence?

WASA and the other consultants worked under certain principles for intervention in the preservation project. They followed stipulations "set forth in the United States Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, as well as international documents such as the 1964 Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments (The Venice Charter), the 1979 Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter (as revised in 1999), the 1994 Nara Document in Authenticity and other relevant documents underpinning the theory and praxis of historic preservation to date."²⁵ The principles for intervention included: retaining original materials; retaining changes that occurred over time; preserving distinct features; repairing rather than replacing, and replacing in kind if necessary;

²⁴ National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 6 October 2008, p. 9.

²⁵ Ayon, Angel, "Historic Fabric vs. Design Intent: Authenticity and Preservation of Modern Architecture at Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum." *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 15:3, 16 Jan 2014, p. 46.

avoiding radical changes in work designed to meet current code and energy requirements; ensuring that treatments are not injurious; and ensuring that new work is reversible and differentiated from historic building fabric ²⁶

ICR's conservation work on the historic paint required them to look at all of the Guggenheim's exterior layers of paint, and trace its evolution over time. According to one of their final reports on the project, "As of 2005, total dry film thickness, representing many applications, was 2mm. It was decided to remove all of this build-up to optimize future coating performance. This permitted the design team to document conditions of the substrate, evaluate cause-and-effect relationships of pathologies, and determine conservation priorities...Because the historic coatings were being removed it was critical that samples taken from the building be examined in order to document the original color." ²⁷

In the fall of 2005, ICR took coating samples from several locations (both gunite and cast-in-place concrete) for a total of 110 specimens, one third which were mounted in resin and polished. These samples were then viewed with a stereo-binocular reflected light microscope at 30x magnification.²⁸ Their study was "based on an examination under the stereobinocular microscope of paint samples from over 100 exterior locations" and "showed that the paints subsequently used prior to 1992-93 were reasonably consistent with Wright's color taste." ²⁹ Typically, 10 layers were found,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Trienens, Amanda Thomas, Glenn Boornazian, and Norman Weiss, "Concrete Repairs and Coatings for Frank Lloyd Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum," *The Challenge of Change: Dealing with the Legacy of the Modern Movement* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS Press under the imprint Delft University Press, 2008), p. 375.

²⁸ Trienens, "Concrete Repairs," pp. 375-376.

²⁹ Weiss, p. 95.

starting with a translucent blue primer followed by a thick buff (light brown) layer.³⁰ (See Figures 7 & 8.)

ICR determined the original paint color was an exterior finish, which was then commercially known as “Cocoon,” an early version of elastomeric coating exhibiting a yellowish “buff” color. As seen in cross-section, Cocoon had a typical dry film thickness between 0.4 mm and 0.5mm, was glossy, changed color in the uppermost 0.02 mm to 0.05 mm due to exposure to ultraviolet light, and had a layer of soiling on the once exposed surface.³¹ According to that same report, “The color stratigraphy, with few exceptions, also suggests that the original finish was re-coated with a darker tone matching the then-soiled appearance of the Cocoon. That darker layer is typically followed by three campaigns with colors that are closer to the original buff. Presumably these four layers were coated between the 1960s to late 1980s. During the construction of the 1992 addition by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, the Frank Lloyd Wright building was again re-coated with an off-white primer followed by a light gray as the finish. Finally, the building was re-coated in 2004, in a similarly light, low-chroma color, the system consisting again of one primer and one top coat.”³²

In an ICR report from May 18, 2007, it says that the “Historic paint analysis for exterior coatings” was submitted to the owner and then to the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission: “...the original finish was repainted a darker tone matching the then-soiled appearance of the Cocoon. That darker layer is typically followed by three campaigns with colors that are close to the original buff. Of these four layers, the first (directly after the Cocoon) is darkest, followed by the lightest, then the

³⁰ Trienens, “Concrete Repairs,” p. 376.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

pinkest, and finally the most yellow.”³³ And so, via ICR’s paint analyses, there was now scientific evidence to fuel the controversy over what to paint the exterior during the 2007 restoration.

Angel Ayon, the Project Architect for the Exterior Restoration and Building Enhancement of the Guggenheim Museum writes, “Given that the original design intent for the exterior finish had long been lost with overpainting of the Cocoon, and that the historic coating fabric embedded in more than ten layers of paint had been removed as part of the work, special consideration was given to using the original colour for the new exterior finish.”³⁴ But he also suggests that painting the exterior the original Cocoon would “have resulted in a ‘period restoration’ which would have attempted to de-emphasize the presence – and relevance to the Guggenheim as an institution – of the 1992 addition and renovation, which to date is the most noticeable exponent of the building’s evolution after the original construction.”³⁵ Clearly his bias is towards the value of alterations made over time increasing in historic and cultural importance.

This monumental restoration begun in 2007 was an opportunity for the museum to re-coat the exterior in the original color selected and approved by Wright, but the Guggenheim exterior instead was given a new paint system. A “new multilayer paint system was used, after paint stripping, repairs and further surface preparation;” the products were manufactured by Mapei International (Mapelastic and

³³ Weiss, p. 95.

³⁴ Ayon, p. 52.

³⁵ Ibid.

Elastocolor Rasante)³⁶ and selected by ICR, based on a lengthy programme of laboratory and on-site testing.³⁷

The final decision on the matter of color was made by the eleven-member LPC, led by director Robert Tierney, on November 20, 2007, following a contentious and landmark debate. In essence, the debate was over whether to value the architect's intent or change over time. The LPC failed to clearly value either. It seems their decision was outright flawed. The decision, which stands in perpetuity, allowed for the use of the color BF 72, which was neither the color Wright had intended, nor a color ever used on the Guggenheim's exterior at any point during its history. Approval was given for a match to the BF 72, the off-white *primer* used in the 1992 Gwathmey Siegel addition, not even the color of the 1992 paint finish, BF 62. As the ICR report says, "Thus, the Museum today has been painted a colour that was never used as a finish in its 50-year history."³⁸

However, the controversy can still be broken down on two sides, despite the LPC's apparently confused, or improperly informed, decision. At the heart of the matter is still the issue of which should be more highly valued, the intent of the architect, or the cultural value of change over time, which may or may not include the desires of the client, and/or the community at large. In this case, that would translate to Wright's intent versus the desires of the Guggenheim leadership since 1959. Additionally, the emotions and will of the neighborhood, New York at large, or any interested parties (e.g. people with an interest in Wright's legacy, etc.) need to be considered as well. How do values get weighed, and what happened in this case?

³⁶ Weiss, p. 96.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Weiss, p. 96. This is just crazy. The LPC didn't vote to a match to the Gwathmey Siegel finish paint; they voted for a match to the primer.

Within the LPC controversy specifically, there were argument for both perspectives. Proponent Simeon Bankoff, director of the Historic Districts Council, was quoted as saying, “we have a chance to see the full expression of what was the greatest American architect’s vision for his masterpiece.” Seri Worden, executive director of Friends of the Upper West Side Historic Districts, said this was an “opportunity for New Yorkers to see the Guggenheim as the architect intended it.”³⁹ However, opponent Alex Herrera, technical director for the New York Landmarks Conservancy and an architect, said, “I think it’s been the other, whiter color for so much longer that it almost means it’s earned its historical legitimacy. If you find the original color, you do it more for the intellectual and academic value—you don’t have to actually paint it that color.” Peg Breen, president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, said, “It’s more what people are used to now...I think it would be very startling to change the color of the Guggenheim right now.”⁴⁰ These arguments epitomize the issues very clearly, and prove why it is so hard to cleanly come down on either side.

At the LPC hearing, Thomas Krens, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, said the light gray color is “the color most commonly associated with the building...if I were to call up Frank Lloyd Wright right now and ask him what his preference might be, he might well choose the original color.”⁴¹ Krens here acknowledged that Wright’s intent was something other than white-white. And yet he went on to say that the light gray color “seems to work well” with the surrounding neighborhood and with the 1992 expansion.⁴² The decision was made, 7-2, in favor of the “contemporary light gray,” the off-white

³⁹ Sarlin, Benjamin, “Guggenheim Museum Color Choice Attracts Attention to Restoration Question,” *New York Sun*, 20 Nov 2007, <http://hdc.org/hdc-2/guggenheim-museum-color-choice-attracts-attention-to-restorationquestion>.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Sarlin, “Guggenheim Museum Color Choice Attracts Attention to Restoration Question.”

⁴¹ Chan, Sewell, “Are Guggenheim’s True Colors Shining Through?” *The New York Times*, 20 Nov 2007, 1:32 pm, https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/guggenheim-will-remain-light-gray/?_r=0.

⁴² Chan, Sewell, “Pale Gray or Light Yellow? A Ruling on Guggenheim,” *The New York Times*, 21 Nov 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/21/arts/design/21gugg.html>.

primer, BG 72. It could be argued that the LPC finally came down on the side of the value of historic change and in favor of the client itself.

Interestingly, an LPC staff member had called Charles Gwathmey in mid-2007 to discuss the exterior paint color in preparation for the two public hearings that took place in September and November 2007. Gwathmey apparently “had no personal preference” on whether Wright’s original color or the cool grey should now be used, and instead commented that “the LPC should act as conservation professionals, as they do in so many other cases involving questions of authenticity.” But is how the LPC acted consistent—do they always come down on the side of historic change over an architect’s intent? And whatever the answer to that question may be, where *should* their priorities lie?

This question extends not just to the Guggenheim’s exterior color, but to all other preservation problems as well. Where should the priority be in decision making? On the one hand it could be thought of as “correct” to value design intent, which prioritizes the designer’s intent and vision. To value this is to also be able to scientifically understand that which can be proved through facts. However, the architecture’s original expression, and what the designer’s intention may have been is also often an evolving set of ideas. Additionally, there is a difference between an architect’s core concepts and the details—should these be weighed evenly? This seems relevant in the questioning of Wright’s choice of color.⁴³ And what is to be said about the fact that Wright is such a historically important figure in his own right?

⁴³ Matero, Frank G. and Fitzgerald, Robert, ‘The Fallacies of Intent: “Finishing” Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum,’ APT Bulletin: Journal of Preservation Technology, Vol. 38, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 3-12.

On the other hand, value could be placed with the cultural value of the historic building fabric and/or narrative, which would allow for the fact that the building has had a life; it has physically changed over time, through a long series of contributing changes, additions, and renovations, “necessitated by the growth and modernization of the institution.”⁴⁴ Therefore people have made new associations with that change and the building, as the general public has an association with the bright white and the Guggenheim’s image in their minds. Perhaps the LPC’s decision could be justified simply with the argument that the Guggenheim merely wanted to avoid a “period restoration,” and therefore bringing back the original Cocoon was out of the question.

However, there is also the question of authenticity—what is *authentic*? If it is determined that something is authentic, how should it be protected, and at what cost? According to the 1994 Nara Document, authenticity is “the essential qualifying factor in concerning values.”⁴⁵ What about craftsmanship, cultural integrity, physical durability, original architectural expression, or contributing changes? What about the value of intangible heritage? What is the role of scientific fact or technical evidence? Can the truth be ignored? *How* can it be ignored? Who has the power to make these value judgments, or who should be allowed to make them? And to get back to the Guggenheim controversy specifically, how did the issue of color ever come up? Why was it ever allowed to happen that the exterior was painted lighter than Wright wanted? Clearly there were conflicting interests, and very quickly after the museum was built, there is evidence that the client’s wishes, via Sweeney, were met, ignoring Wright altogether.

⁴⁴ Guggenheim.org, “Wright’s Living Organism.”

⁴⁵ *The Nara Document on Authenticity*, 1994.

How much value should be placed on public sentiment, collective memory, or emotion? Has the Guggenheim reached a level of both local and national significance that it is now beholden to the community at large? How did the user's design changes come to be valued so much? In a sense, the museum's physical appearance is a symbol, one that can immediately be recognized via its curving form and, yes, its white color. At this point in time there is even a Lego set of the building, which is white-white, not buff tan. The same is true for the branding of the Guggenheim—the color white shows up everywhere. So, is white-white now understood to be the building's iconic color? Even in the National Historic Landmark Nomination, regarding the Gwathmey Siegel addition from 1992, it is written that “approaching the building's fiftieth anniversary, the addition is already part of the collective memory of the general public,”⁴⁶ which acknowledges that this place does have a spot in people's hearts and minds.

Peter Blake, editor of *Architectural Forum*, wrote a piece on the museum when it opened, entitled “The Guggenheim: Museum or Monument?”⁴⁷ This is a good question—does calling something a monument, or does a place's inherent monumentality automatically give a place more significance or importance in the minds of those who have an association with it? Aren't monuments built for people so they can create their own relationships with them? There is a general acknowledgement that the Guggenheim is one of Wright's key works, whether or not anyone agrees on its merits as a museum, so shouldn't that count for something? The National Historic Landmark Nomination says, “most (scholars) resolved that it was an architectural masterpiece, citing its structural achievement, sculptural beauty, and embodiment of Wright's organic philosophy.”⁴⁸ If Wright's vision starts to physically erode, does it

⁴⁶ National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 6 October 2008, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Blake, “The Guggenheim,” *Architectural Forum*.

⁴⁸ National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 6 October 2008, p. 28.

also begin to lose value? Does the authenticity of his vision become less important or hidden from plain sight?

Authenticity was once thought to be ultimately determined by scientific fact and the physical fabric of a thing or place. But that notion has changed over time, and it has come to also include not only the material, but the aesthetic, contextual, and experiential as well; in other words, the intangible has been given more value in the assessment of places today. A building can pick up meaning because of events that have taken place there, or in the case of the Guggenheim, because of the contentious saga of its exterior appearance, as well as the community's associations with this site. The traditional model of authenticity has been reversed over time, and it is no longer purely about science, but about what cannot as easily or objectively be quantified as well.

In the case of the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, there was a danger in the museum's directors relying too heavily on science, and it seems that those people making the decision to remove all of the alsecco painting took their scientific hypotheses perhaps a bit too far. Yes, preservation is a scientifically informed art, but it is merely that—an *informed* art. There are no definitive answers that science can provide, only facts for which to base one's decisions. What role should scientific facts have played in the case of the Guggenheim? Could the exterior finish of the Guggenheim somehow have been refinished to aesthetically tell its story, or to have visually left evidence of the doubt or the philosophical struggle in this dilemma? For example, the exterior could have been repainted its original color, while also acknowledging the changes to that color over time by leaving one patch of the current exterior exposed, as was done in the restorations of the ceiling in Grand Central Station and of the floor of the Rookery in Chicago. It says in the Venice Charter of 1964, "A monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness...The valid contributions of all periods of the building of a monument

must be respected.”⁴⁹ Currently, all of the Guggenheim’s periods of significance are not being acknowledged.

So what color should the Guggenheim be painted, and why does this matter? Painting the building the original Cocoon could both be read as overlooking the changes the building has undergone over the years, but also an acknowledgment that it is scientifically understood that Wright’s original vision was to have a Cocoon-colored exterior facade. It is a fact that of all the colors the building has had over the years, there is only one original. But it is also a fact that the building has evolved; it is a “living organism.”⁵⁰ It does seem like poor solution, however, that the color the LPC ruled on wasn’t actually ever one of the many shades the Guggenheim exterior had ever been painted. Even so, preservation cannot be looked at as merely a black and white practice—it isn’t enough to either preserve the original design intent at the expense of the cultural value of change over time, or vice versa. In this day and age it seems that even if one of the two sides is privileged over the other, both should be acknowledged. For what is the purpose of preservation—is it to merely save and protect the physical, to tell the story of history, or to make value judgments on behalf of a community?

In his essay “Color, Form, and Meaning in the Guggenheim Museum,” published on the occasion of the Guggenheim’s 50th anniversary, Gillermo Zuaznabar writes:

“To appreciate the color of the Guggenheim in conjunction with its form, we should neither search for it in the remains of its paint, now burnt by the sun, spoiled by pollution, and concealed by human action, nor allow ourselves to be deceived by eyes and a mind that think they were white when perceiving brightness. To understand its color, we must visit the museum during its

⁴⁹ International Council on Monuments and Sites, International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter, 1964), http://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf.

⁵⁰ Guggenheim.org, “Wright’s Living Organism.”

inauguration in 1959 with someone who has felt the form, light, and impression of architecture not visually but corporally. The body has a greater memory than the mind, and in this way, the Guggenheim can be understood in its correct correspondence between color and form.”⁵¹

Perhaps here Zuaznabar makes the most legitimate statement on the matter. There really is no way to fully grasp the true color of this place physically today. The only way one can truly understand the color of the Guggenheim is to have witnessed in his own body the experience of being at this place in 1959. Perhaps the irony of it all therefore is that Wright would have himself correctly understood the Guggenheim’s color, but that understanding became impossible to grasp the moment he passed on from this earth. All we can do today is attempt as best we can to approximate that experience, and all of the other intangible experiences that countless souls have encountered with this building over the past fifty-eight years.

⁵¹ Zuaznabar, Gillermo, “Color, Form, and Meaning in the Guggenheim Museum,” *The Guggenheim: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Making of the Modern Museum* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009), p. 108.



Figure 1: Hollingshead Cocoon paint colors; PV 020 “Buff” was the color chosen and approved by FLW; see his initials and Approval stamps from 24 July 1958. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York.

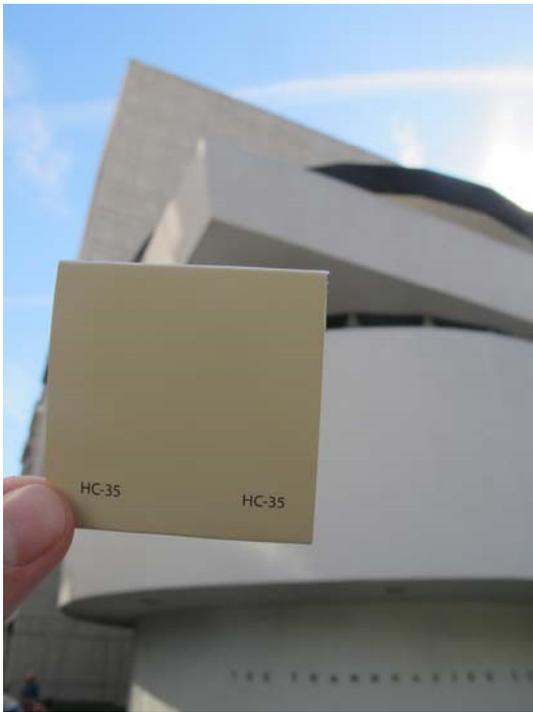


Figure 2: Benjamin Moore HC-35 color chip in comparison with the façade in the foreground; Gwathmey Siegel’s addition in the background. Photo author’s own.



Figure 3: Benjamin Moore HC-35 color chip in comparison with current exterior of the Guggenheim. Photo author's own.



Figure 4: Benjamin Moore HC-35 color chip in comparison with current exterior of the Guggenheim. Photo author's own.



Figure 5: Benjamin Moore HC-35 color chip in comparison with current exterior of the Guggenheim. Photo author's own.



Figure 6: Benjamin Moore HC-35 color chip in comparison with Indiana limestone of the Gwathmey Siegel 1992 addition. Photo author's own.

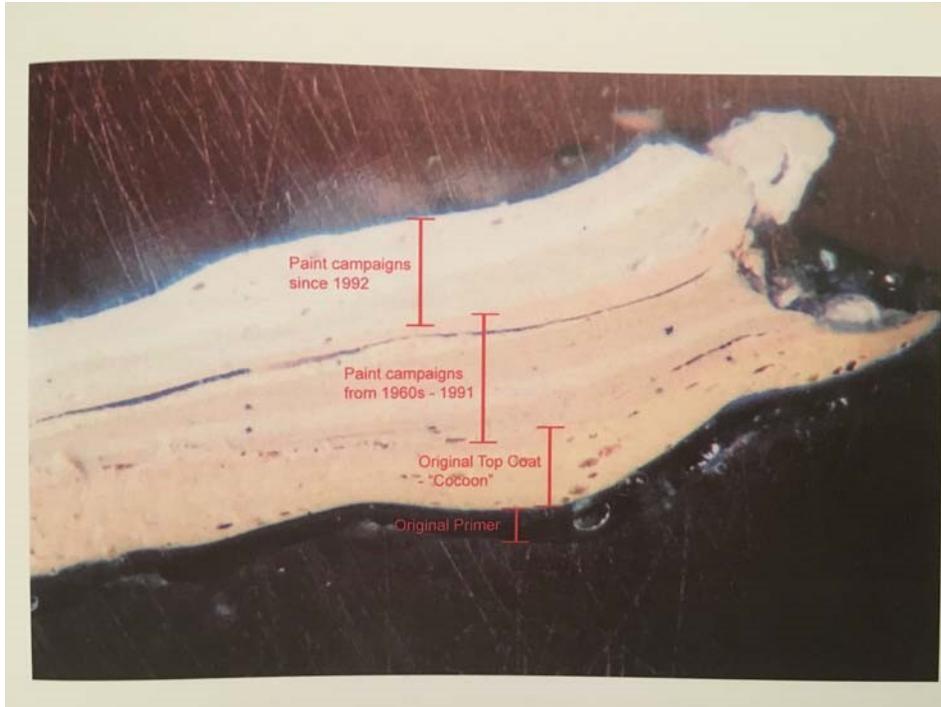


Figure 7: Color stratigraphy of paint layers removed during the museum's 2005-08 restoration. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

ly lighter, cooler
 nheim Archives
 9) that would be
 als approving a
 itly, color images
 ose who remem-
 rs—attest to the
 es changed over
 t's death in 1959,
 Presented with
 er hue, the New
 rtheless elected
 t better comple-
 cluding a 1992
 lt by Gwathmey
 effort they were
 rision, but to rec-
 y" over time.¹⁴ In
 r Wright's death,
 washed; perhaps
 my or discolored,



Figure 8: Cross-section of a paint chip from the Guggenheim model. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Bibliography

Avery Archives & Drawings, Guggenheim Manuscripts, 2401.389, A-V.

Avery Archives & Drawings, Guggenheim Project Files, Durst, C233, Box 01: Folders 37-40.

Avery Archives & Drawings, Guggenheim Specifications, C289rr, Box 617, 1082.96 and 1082.97.

Ayon, Angel, "Historic Fabric vs. Design Intent: Authenticity and Preservation of Modern Architecture at Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum." *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 15:3, 41-58., 16 Jan 2014.

Blake, Peter, "The Guggenheim: Museum or Monument?" *Architectural Forum*.

Chan, Sewell, "Are Guggenheim's True Colors Shining Through?" *The New York Times*, 20 Nov 2007, 1:32 pm, https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/guggenheim-will-remain-light-gray/?_r=0.

Chan, Sewell, "Pale Gray or Light Yellow? A Ruling on Guggenheim," *The New York Times*, 21 Nov 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/21/arts/design/21gugg.html>.

Glueck, Grace, "In Guggenheim Restoration, Wright Laughs Last," *The New York Times*, 12 Aug 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/12/arts/in-guggenheim-restoration-wright-laughslast.html?pagewanted=all>.

Goldberger, Paul, "Architecture Review: In Adding to the Guggenheim, a Little Less Goes a Long Way," *The New York Times*, 15 Feb 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/15/arts/archetecture-view-inadding-to-the-guggenheim-a-little-less-goes-a-long-way.html?pagewanted=all>.

"Guggenheim Museum Gets a Plastic Coating," *New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Oct 19, 1958; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index, pg. R11.

Guggenheim.org, "Wright's Living Organism: The Evolution of the Guggenheim Museum," <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/wrights-living-organism-the-evolution-of-theguggenheim-museum>.

International Council on Monuments and Sites, *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter, 1964)*, http://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf.

Jordy, William H. "The Encompassing Environment of Free-Form Architecture: Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum." *American Buildings and Their Architects, Volume 4: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972.

Landmarks Preservation Commission, Designation List 226, LP-1774, dated 14 August 1990.

Landmarks Preservation Commission, Designation List 226, LP-1775, dated 14 August 1990.

Matero, Frank G. and Fitzgerald, Robert, 'The Fallacies of Intent: "Finishing" Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum,' *APT Bulletin: Journal of Preservation Technology*, Vol. 38, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 3-12.

Moody, Ellen, "Conserving and Exhibiting the New York Models," *Frank Lloyd Wright: Unpacking the Archive* (New York, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017), pp. 226-235.

The Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994.

National Historic Landmark Nomination, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 6 October 2008.

The New York Times, "Guggenheim Museum is Designated as a Landmark," 19 Aug 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/19/nyregion/guggenheim-museum-is-designated-a-landmark.html>.

Sarlin, Benjamin, "Guggenheim Museum Color Choice Attracts Attention to Restoration Question," *New York Sun*, 20 Nov 2007, <http://hdc.org/hdc-2/guggenheim-museum-color-choice-attracts-attention-to-restoration-question>.

Specifications for the The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, as well as an earlier draft version (Avery). Trienens, Amanda Thomas, Glenn Boornazian, and Norman R. Weiss, "Guggenheim Museum: Laboratory and Field Evaluation of Concrete Repair Products," *Concrete Repair Bulletin*, September/October 2009, pp. 13-17.

Trienens, Amanda Thomas, Glenn Boornazian, and Norman Weiss, "Concrete Repairs and Coatings for Frank Lloyd Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum," *The Challenge of Change: Dealing with the Legacy of the Modern Movement* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS Press under the imprint Delft University Press, 2008), pp. 375-382.

Weiss, Norman R., Glenn Boornazian and Amanda R. Trienens, Integrated Conservation Resources, Inc. "Guggenheim Museum Exterior Color: A Note from the Paint Analysts." *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, March 2010, pp. 95-96.

Wright, Frank Lloyd, several drafts of an essay entitled "White White-Wash." Wright Foundation Archives (Avery).

Wright, Frank Lloyd, letter to James J. Sweeney, 5 Oct. 1955, in *Guggenheim Correspondence*, p. 215.

Wright, Frank Lloyd, letter to George Cohen, 13 Jan 1959.

Zuaznabar, Gillermo, "Color, Form, and Meaning in the Guggenheim Museum," *The Guggenheim: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Making of the Modern Museum* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009), pp. 100-109.

The author spoke with: Norman Weiss, Ellen Moody, Mary Jablonski, Jennifer Gray.