

RAISING THE STAKES TO SAVE AND RESTORE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S ROBIE HOUSE: A MODERN ARCHITECTURAL PALIMPSEST BETWEEN POLITICS AND PRESERVATION PRACTICES (1957–67)

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to provide a multi-perspective narration of the stakeholders involved in the political campaign to save and restore the Robie House (1910) in Chicago, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The house was threatened to be demolished in 1957 by its owner of the time, the Chicago Theological Seminary, and eventually saved through an international campaign that set a paramount precedent for American preservation. In 2023 an in-depth study conducted by Daniel Bluestone unraveled the intricate skein of the 1957 events, focusing on the active role of a relentless 89-year-old Frank Lloyd Wright in gathering the media attention to save his work.

This paper, instead, aims to identify the legitimate perspectives of each figure involved in the political campaign to save the property: the Chicago Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago, the Public Institutions, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, and the Webb and Knapp Company, highlighting the complexities gravitating around a restoration case in the United States of America. The objective of this paper, in line with the research of the author, is to underline the peculiarities of American preservation from an Italian scientific perspective. This paradigmatic study case will show how the discourse around the Robie House's salvation was so pivotal to obliterating any debate regarding the actual principles of the 1967 intervention, when the Robie House became the headquarters of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs, with an interior design reinterpretation by the firm SOM. This lacking debate will set the base for a recurring pattern when, from 2000 to 2009, the house will be brought back to its original appearance, with the erasure of its historic palimpsest, and the subsequent celebration of its authorship, as happened in 1957 salvation, that, other than Wright, was possible thanks to contextual events and different protagonists of the time.

Introduction: The importance of the context over time

Although Frank Lloyd Wright's authorship of the Robie House is central in assessing its significance, the contextual and political features have always played a huge role in the history of this fabric, too. Before and after the threads of demolition of 1957, the nearby areas didn't only affect the architectural aspects of the house in "meeting nature's soft shapes with its order of sharp edges and planes" (Hoffmann 1984, p. 35), but also in the Frederick C. Robie's choice to buy the lot between 5757 South Woodlawn Ave and 58th Street from a friend, Herberth E. Goodman, that he previously purchased to protect his own house from a speculative development at the south corner. In Robie's choice of Hyde Park, it was also decisive Lora Hieronymous's affection for the place, the wife of Frederick C. Robie, who wanted to keep enjoying the campus life of the nearby Foster Hall, the women's dormitory, that she attended as a university student from 1896 to 1900 (Hoffman 1984, p. 6).

In 1926, external factors proved to be pivotal in the sale of the house from the third owners, the Wilber family, to the Chicago Theological Seminary, since the construction by the University of Chicago of the Ida Noyes Hall comprised the South view over the Midway Plaisance (Hoffmann 1984, p. 91). Between the '40s and the '50s, the character of the neighborhood had become increasingly related to education, and the Chicago Theological Seminary, a religious didactic society for young ministers, repeatedly tried to expand its property by getting rid of the Robie House, that they turned into a dormitory and refectory, proudly showing it in the postcards as an illustrious flagship, providential for their image (Figure 1).

The salvation of the Robie House in 1958, despite the key role played by Wright, was a result obtained thanks to a series of events, whose final chapter was the economic endeavor of a New York developer, William Zeckendorf, who, far from being a philanthropist, used this purchase as a public leverage to favor his business in the Robie House's context, Hyde Park, with more than 250 new buildings realized in five years.

The contextual and political aspects of the house influenced the events that occurred in 1967, too, when the Robie House became the headquarters of a political institution and was targeted by some students' protests as an unrealistic symbol of power, with minor damages in 1970.

The Robie House context became more and more entangled with the University over time, and the house, when assigned to the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust in 1997, was turned into a museum, celebrating Wright's figure and erasing its historic evolution over time, dense of changing events. The architectural promenade of University campus, of which the Robie house museum represented an important part, was exalted again in 2009, when Rafael Viñoly Architects designed the Booth School of Business in front of it, realizing a "crisp, low, modern cantilevered mass that echoed the strong horizontal lines of the Robie," (Bluestone 2017, p. 245–6).

It is not hard to state that the external factors proved as influential in the fate of the house as the role played by the author. However, Frank Lloyd Wright was considered the turning point of the house's salvation, and the key reference in future restorations, exemplifying a recurring American approach in defining a period of significance usually related



Figure 1: Postcard of the Chicago Theological Seminary, before 1957 (undated). The Robie House is remained Woodlawn House, Chicago. (Source: Hanna Holborn Gray Special Research Collections Research Center Archive, Postcards Collection, 20th Century, Folder 24.)

to the author. This paper will try to complicate the things in the events that occurred during the house salvation from 1957 to 1963, highlighting the multi-perspective game played by different stakeholders, with a final critical interpretation of the 1967 restoration, when a new interesting phase, without mimetic intentions, characterized the house.

The research is conducted through the in-depth investigation of a large amount of papers, clippings, archival materials, and restoration files that document the evolving phases of the fabric. The recent 2023 Daniel Bluestone's paper investigates the same time span, but it mainly refers to the Chancellor Kimpton Administration Records. This paper instead will focus more on the Julian Levi Administration Records, related to the Executive Director of the South-East Chicago Commission, who was a protagonist in the renewal of Hyde Park, and a close connection to William Zeckendorf in his redevelopment intervention.

The multi-perspective view of this paper will be narrated by examining each position's interests, latent intentions, ambitions, and obtained results, in a complex challenge in which the Robie House was only the apparent subject of the contention from each stakeholder, aiming to improve their position throughout this political challenge.

The Chicago Theological Seminary's Position

In 1957, the decisive stakeholder was the owner of the house, the Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS), which purchased it in 1926 to secure further expansion. The house was proudly used as a refectory and dormitory, as remembered by enthusiastic students who lived there, like in 1988 by Jean Duncan Hall, identifying her experience with Wright: "a genius, and an artist, an artist who built houses which made living in them a joy." (HHG, 1988). The seminary tried over time to get rid of the house, hoping to raise the attention with weak treads of demolition, constantly anticipated by protests and reactions, as in 1941:

Always perceived as the villains in the story, the CTS owned an expansive property unfit for their necessities. To be taken seriously, their official position is firmly repeated in many declarations of 1957. The President of CTS, Arthur McGiffert, states in a public declaration on March 1, 1957: "Due to structural deterioration, the building requires an immediate expenditure of \$65-\$75,000 [...] other essential repairs to put the building into safe and usable shape [...] will require approximately \$25,000. [...] The Seminary, with its limited funds, derived entirely from contributions, found it economically impossible to maintain the Frank Lloyd Wright house as an architectural monument." (HHG, 1957), recognizing, at the same time, the significance of the Robie House as an example of primary American architecture. Shortly after, when national protests erupted on the wake of Wright's demonstration, the CTS set a price for selling the house, \$100,000, otherwise proposing the unrealistic solution to move it to another lot, with a feasibility plan commissioned to the Barnard Company (HHG, 1957), the same that realized the house in 1910, whose partial fixed price for the operation was \$124,000.

In 1960, when scrutinizing the 1957 sale documents from the CTS to Zeckendorf, the legal office members of the University of Chicago made an unexpected discovery in the deed of conveyance, highly protective in favor of the Robie. The contract imposed to Webb & Knapp to "make substantial repairs to the exterior and interior of the building [...]"

and to keep the premises in excellent condition." Since the CTS moved to the adjacent lot to build their new facility, they imposed to leave the view over the house unaltered, by prohibiting "to plant or erect any obstruction on the north lot line of the property which is over five feet in height." Furthermore, the buyers were obliged, "by January 1, 1966, to transfer the property to the National Trust for Historic Preservation if said trust is still in existence. [...] If not, it is to transfer the property to some other similar agency approved by CTS," (HHG, 1960), demonstrating, despite the public position, to be actual advocates for the protection of the house.

The CTS raised the stake at the highest level so that the property reached a high value in the contention, and was able, in August 1958, to sell the house at a higher price than originally proposed, \$125,000, completing their plan, defending the monument, and acting as a fuse that lights the history of the Robie House, also as a pivotal event for the American historic preservation. Indeed, "the successful 1957 campaign to preserve the Robie House soon boomed nearly as large in preservation history as the building did in architectural history." (Bluestone, 2023, p. 213).

The University of Chicago's Position

The second stakeholder, the University of Chicago (UoC), was in a complex and delicate position. From the 40s they continuously received letters from eminent figures, like Friske Kimball, Philip Johnson, Douglas Haskell, disuading them not to raze the house (HHG, 1941; HHG, 1951). They always needed to make clear that they were not the owner of the Robie, which belonged to CTS, inviting people to forward their protests to them. After Wright showed up in favor of the house in 1957, the University understood that they could play the role of the dealer in this challenge, aiming to improve their image as advocates of the house without diverting funds from their annual balance.

UoC initially accepted to be the repository (HHG, 1957) for the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, but then they started scrutinizing the recent Tallies events and after discovering the financial inability (HHG, 1957) of the Foundation they avoided any involvement in its management and maintenance. One of the key figures, John Kirkpatrick, the Vice-Chancellor of the time, wrote in a letter to Chancellor Kimpton: "the University could not afford to take title, even though we should like very much to see the Robie House maintained as an architectural library." (HHG, 1957). The temptation to handle the property kept being alive also in 1960, when Zeckendorf, close to complete his business, intended to hand off this property to the university, and a new internal debate arose between the leading figures involved: "on the one hand, the costs of rehabilitating and maintaining are a problem that we can't overlook. On the other hand, however, it is an international monument that could probably be put to good use by the University" (HHG, 1960).

In any case, UoC was the mediator between a lot of potential beneficiaries of the house, like the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Beadle family, the Burnham Library of the Art Institute, but always avoiding any form of economic obligation, also in receiving money, legitimately affirming that the university was not eligible for tax-deductible gifts, pushing for the creation of a trust to collect donations, the Committee for the Preservation of The Robie House, held by Ira J. Bach,

THE ROBIE HOUSE COMMITTEE

Chairman: Robert M. Johnson
 Vice-Chairman: John H. Johnson
 Secretary: William Zeckendorf
 Treasurer: William Zeckendorf
 Members: Robert M. Johnson, John H. Johnson, William Zeckendorf, Frank Lloyd Wright, Daniel Bluestone, Richard Nickel, etc.

FROM THE ROBIE HOUSE COMMITTEE:
 A half-century ago, the Robie House was one of the finest examples of Chicago architecture. Its architect was Frank Lloyd Wright. The historical interest in it is a "Robie House" and its concept has become a national symbol. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States.

WHAT ROBIE HOUSE MEANS
 "Robie House has become a symbol of an entire country. The desire to have it is a possession of the entire people of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States."

WHAT YOU CAN DO
 "The Robie House is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States. It is a masterpiece of architecture and a landmark in the history of the United States."

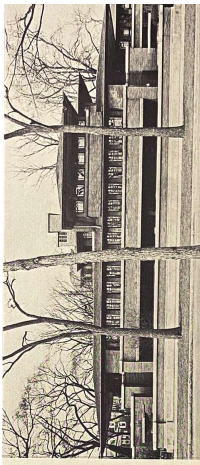


Figure 2: The Robie House Committee Flyer to advertise the fundraising, 1963; Four sides, with the south elevation view photo commissioned to Richard Nickel. (Source: Art Institute Archive, Chicago, Richard Nickel Archive, Chicago, Richard Nickel Archive, Box. EF 96.18.)

and joined since the beginning by an international panel of world-renowned figures (Figure 2).

Public Administrations (National Trust for Historic Preservation and the City of Chicago)

A lot of proposals for acquiring the Robie House were made to public institutions, like Cook County and the State of Illinois, but all of them proved to be uninterested or devoid of funds. The National Trust for Historic Preservation wanted to demonstrate its determination in the cause through the direct involvement of the president, Richard H. Howland (HHG, 1957), but the legislation of the time made them powerless and they could only contribute through an exposé on their journal (Historic Preservation, 1957). The City of Chicago proved to be the only effective public institution in this situation, with the involvement of the newly created Chicago Landmark Commission. Mayor Richard J. Daley wrote in a letter to Chancellor Kimpton: "The announced plan of the Chicago Theological Seminary to raze Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House is a matter of considerable concern to Chicago. Recently the City Council, recognizing the cultural heritage of our city and desiring to preserve it, created a Commission on Chicago Architectural Landmarks. It is our hope and expectation that this commission will work out an acceptable solution for the preservation of the Robie House" (HHG, 1988). The Commission will have the essential role to create a new organized Committee to collect the donations for the Robie House and to help foster the knowledge of the House to the public through open tours. However, after almost one year, they will only collect almost \$60,000 out of the supposed \$250,000 that will be used for roof repairs in 1965 (HHG, 1965).

Wright and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation
 Frank Lloyd Wright and his foundation had a determining role in saving the Robie House. "On 18 March 1957, with fanfare, flair, and newspaper and television reports following his wake, Wright, walking with his cane in hand and his pork pie hat on his head, toured the Robie House. Wright expressed outrage over the demolition plan and he deployed a certain

verbal outrageousness to be sure that people learned about the crisis." (Bluestone 2023, p. 213). Wright aimed to demonstrate how the fight for the Robie House was a fight for the entire nation to defend the American authentic cultural heritage. He was almost 90 when he gave a filmed tour of the house, saying in an interview that the conditions were almost perfect and only the kitchen was out of date due to a lack of janitorship (Chicago Daily Tribune, 1957), defining the house as "a cornerstone of American architecture," and teasing the CTS sentencing: "it is particularly sad that professional religionists should be the executioners. It all goes to show the danger of entrusting anything spiritual to the clergy." (Bluestone 2023, p. 215).

In this poker game, Wright bluffed proposing to manage the house with the funds of his Foundation, recently condemned by the Wisconsin Supreme Court for acting as a non-profit organization, and to use it as an architectural museum, referring to a long-established preservation practice in the US, inaugurated with Mount Vernon, the George Washington's manse in Virginia (Bluestone 2023, p. 216), aiming to exalt his figure in this salvation effort. He was undoubtedly able to take time and gather the energies for an international protest that led to the final salvation. After his death many of his influential friends, like the senator William Benton and Edgar Kauffmann Jr., proposed new uses adequate to the prestigious role of the house, that were inextricably connected to the authorship of the architect.

William Zeckendorf and the Webb & Knapp
 Senator William Benton also provided the rawest definition for the last player of the game, William Zeckendorf, writing in a letter: "[...] would not count on inheriting the house from Zeckendorf. He is in business strictly for the money. And I'm not criticizing him. But I do not think he specializes in philanthropic bequests." (HHG, 1960). At opposition of the CTS, Zeckendorf, the developer who bought the house in 1958, putting an end to the fears of demolition, was perceived as the hero figure, like a *deus ex machina* who addressed with private money an unsolvable problem. According to Bluestone, Wright had a role in his involvement

(Bluestone 2023, p. 232), while William Hartmann, in his oral history, affirmed that the key figure in this connection was lech Ming Pei (Blum, 1991). Zeckendorf immediately informed Julian Levi (HHG, 1957), the president of the South East Chicago Commission, of the purchase, an action that proved to be providential for his image before starting his urban renewal works in Hyde Park. The repercussions of his interventions were narrated in the book *Making the Second Ghetto* by Arnold Hirsch which refers to the adverse effects of Zeckendorf's involvement in the Hyde Park context. After he finished his business, and he used the house as his temporary headquarters, he donated the building to the University of Chicago, that "accepted the responsibility to maintain the and use of the Robbie House in perpetuity provided the substantial sum required to restore and repair it would be developed by those who wanted it preserved," (HHG, 1974), a condition that today still persists.

Conclusions: Modern Architecture and Time Evolution

In 1963, when most of the Hyde Park renewal was completed, the house was donated by Zeckendorf to the University of Chicago and the urge to find money, this time for the restoration, started again. The National Trust, on April 1, 1964, was able to list the house as a National Historic Landmark, with a public dedication attended by the Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, and the Mayor Richard J. Daley (Art Institute of Chicago Archive, n.d.), but not to provide the funds for its preservation and a new rush lasted until 1967 when the Adlai Stevenson Institute for International Affairs, one of the political institutions of the city chose the house as their headquarters (1969) (Figure 3). In this case the restoration was a critical reinterpretation of

the indoor space designed for SOM by Donald Powell and supervised by Walter Netsch (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill Architects and Engineers Private Archive, 1967-1968), a rare condition of a distinguishable and autonomous addition over a modern fabric, whose traces were completely removed over time by improper uses and time-reverting restorations.

While Bluestone's paper did not tackle the methodology applied on the intervention, the aim to study this multi-per-spective condition is to open to a critical further investigation of the approach on actual cases of restoration, that will be carried out in future research. The Italian professor Donatella Fiorani, who investigated the American approach to preservation, highlighted in her study the "American inclination to 'dramatize' events into conservation terms," adding that "dramatization and narration [...] transform the physical concreteness of the historic built heritage into a symbolic element, a shift that is not free from consequences [...] the consequences of seeing architecture as a tool for illustrating history," (Fiorani 2013, pp. 13-17).

Through a first-hand and on-ground Italian scientific perspective, this paper demonstrated that the narration of the events and the involvement of many players in American preservation is necessary since the public institutions, unlike Europe, have small regulatory powers against the intentions of private owners, and these political conditions require the search of funds between other interested wealthy individuals, as constantly happens in almost every American case. On the other hand, this condition determines a methodology where preservation is seen as the final goal of a draining fundraising campaign, undoubtedly positive and unworthy to be methodologically investigated

any further, privileging, especially for modern architecture, the reproduction of the original author's conditions, as happened for the Robbie House after 2000.

Erasing the palimpsest of the events that came after the Wrightian authorial phase, although apparently deferential to his image, might diminish its material authenticity that carries the aesthetic value of the unreachable beauty that Frank Lloyd Wright produced all over his life. These conditions, exemplified in this paper for the Robbie House, but that could easily apply to many other Wright's cases, underline the contemporary need for a major international interest and debate around the actual restoration principle that occurred on these works, many of which, since 2019, also represent a part in the World Heritage.

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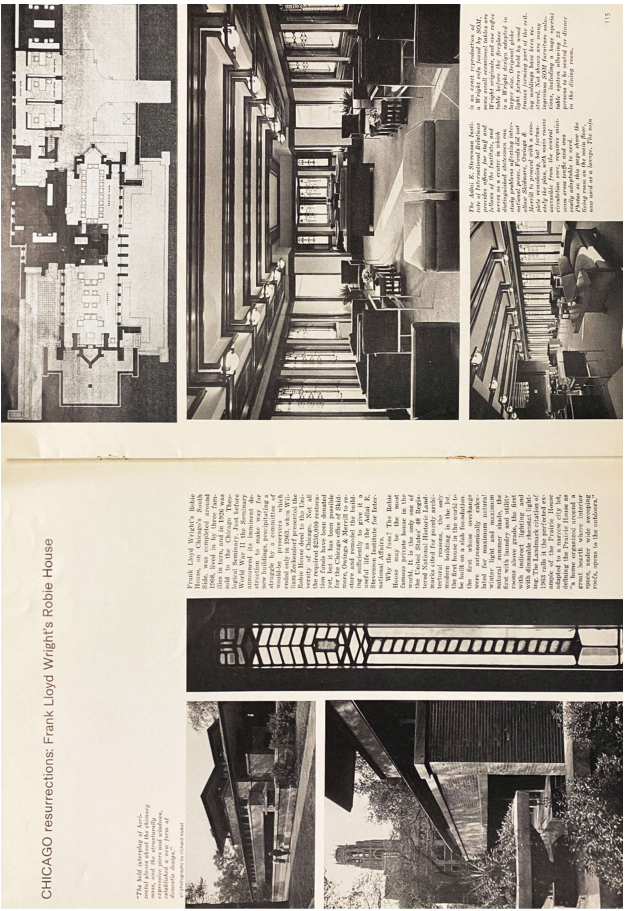


Figure 3: "Chicago Resurrections: Frank Lloyd Wright's Robbie House," (Source: Chicago in June, *Memo for Designers, Interiors, May 1969*, Whitney Publications Inc., P. 115.)

In Between: Architecture and Development of the Urban Landscape