
What's (W)right with Indianapolis?

Frank N. Owings, Jr.*

I only regret that you did not have the opportunity to see something of the city beyond the area we drove through coming in from the airport, because if you had you would not have concluded that this is a hopelessly ugly town. It has its attractive aspects.¹

The year—1957. The place—Indianapolis, Indiana. Democrat Philip Bayt, Jr., was mayor of the city; the first Indianapolis 500 Festival was held in May with a parade and a formal ball (becoming an Indianapolis tradition); veteran race car driver Sam Hanks won the forty-first Memorial Day classic (and announced his retirement from automobile racing while sitting in his car in victory lane); and WFMS became the first FM radio station to broadcast from the city.² Cecil B. DeMille's blockbuster movie *The Ten Commandments* played at the Lyric Theatre downtown for over six months (reserved seating required); and, like Americans throughout the country, Indianapolis residents tuned in their television sets to follow the news coverage of the Russian *Sputnik* satellites or to watch the Milwaukee Braves win the World Series in seven games over the New York Yankees.³ The first Burger Chef (Indianapolis-based national chain restaurant) opened on the city's west side; both *Time* and *Newsweek* cited Shortridge High School as one of America's best;⁴ and on Saturday, November 2, 1957, the ninety-year-old famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright came to town.

The Indianapolis skyline had not changed much during the quarter of a century between 1930 and 1957. Indiana's conservative attitude toward the acceptance of federal monies for post-World War

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¹Wilbur D. Peat, director, John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis, to Frank Lloyd Wright, November 6, 1957 (Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives, Scottsdale, Arizona).

²Greta Shankle and William Dalton, "500 Festival," in *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, ed. David J. Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), 574; *Indianapolis Star*, May 31, 1957; Christy McKay, "WFMS (95.5 FM)," in *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, 1393.

³*Indianapolis Star*, February–August, October 5, 2-10, 1957.

⁴Connie J. Ziegler, "Burger Chef," in *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, 364; William J. Reese, "Education," in *ibid.*, 83.

II programs contributed to the slow improvement of the downtown infrastructure and architecture through the 1940s and 1950s.⁵ With the completion of the Circle Tower Building (on Monument Circle) in 1930, the only significant structure that had been built in the central city was the "modern" J. C. Penney Building (also on the Circle) in 1950. Thus, architecturally, the Indianapolis that Wright observed in 1957 was largely a collection of late-nineteenth and first-quarter twentieth-century structures that were no taller than the Soldiers and Sailors Monument (1901) on the Circle or the seventeen-story Merchants National Bank Building (1913) at Washington and Meridian streets (the city's tallest building until the City-County Building was constructed in 1962).⁶

Nineteen fifty-seven was a crowded year for Wright. He was involved in forty-three architectural projects, had an extensive travel schedule, and made numerous public appearances. Lectures and television programs (e.g., the Mike Wallace interviews in September and Wright's appearance with Carl Sandburg and host Alistair Cooke on "Chicago Dynamic," WTTW-Chicago, in October) placed him in a number of venues around the country.⁷ Forty-one years later his visit to Indianapolis in the fall of 1957 merits some notice.

Cosponsored by the Art Association of Indianapolis and the Business Furniture Company, Wright was invited to Indianapolis to lecture on "his recent architecture" at the John Herron Art Museum on Friday, October 18. By mid-October, however, the architect had developed laryngitis and had to cancel; he rescheduled his talk for Saturday, November 2. The Indianapolis *Star* noted that Wright had canceled a television appearance in New York scheduled for November 3 in order to keep his Indianapolis commitment.⁸

On November 2, before his evening lecture at the art museum, Wright was honored with a champagne reception in the Executive Furniture Guild of America showrooms of the Business Furniture Company office in downtown Indianapolis, where pieces of office furniture designed by Wright and built by Steelcase for the Johnson Wax building were on display. John Ober, then president of the Business Furniture Company, recalled that the reception was a "mad house." Many more people than were invited showed up, making it difficult for Ober to introduce Wright to the guests. Recognizing the situation, Ober ended up placing a chair in the middle of the room on which

⁵ Darryl L. Jones and Howard Caldwell, *Indianapolis* (Indianapolis, 1990), x, 1.

⁶ Rita W. Harlan, "Merchants National Bank Building," in *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, 989.

⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, *Truth Against the World: Frank Lloyd Wright Speaks for Organic Architecture*, ed. Patrick J. Meehan (1987; Washington, D.C., 1992), 22, 144.

⁸ "Frank Lloyd Wright Ill. Lecture Put Off," *Indianapolis News*, October 17, 1957; "Delayed Wright Talk Scheduled," *Indianapolis Star*, October 25, 1957; John E. Brown to Eugene Masselink, October 25, 1957 (Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives).



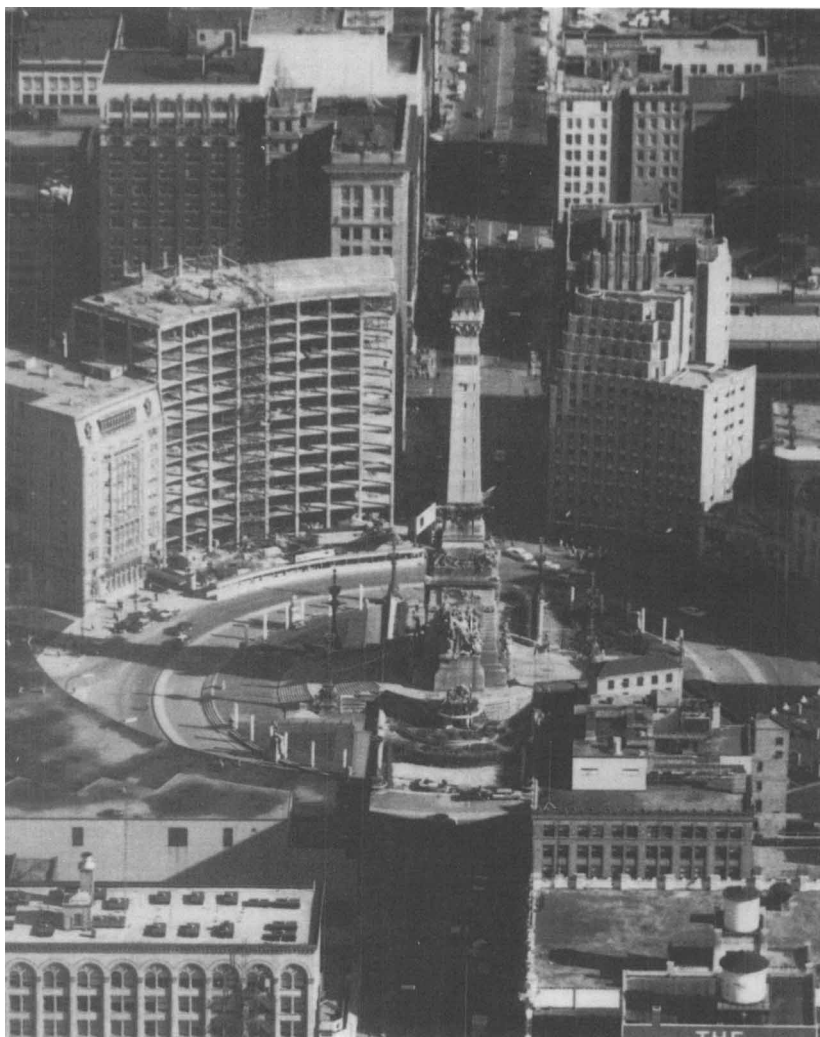
FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT WITH BUSINESS FURNITURE COMPANY OWNERS, C. S. OBER (LEFT) AND JOHN OBER (RIGHT), NOVEMBER 2, 1957

Courtesy Business Furniture Corporation,
Indianapolis, Indiana.

Wright sat and conducted court—in a “sermon on the mount” setting—with many in attendance eventually sitting on the floor around him to listen to the architect’s thought-provoking conversation.⁹

Later that evening Wright spoke to a packed house from the Sculpture Court at the Herron Art Museum. To accommodate the overflow crowd a closed-circuit television system was set up in various rooms of the museum. Apparently, however, the audio portion of the system was not working properly during the initial part of the lecture as John E. Brown, Herron’s director of education, recounted in a letter to Wright’s secretary, Eugene Masselink: “Naturally, the

⁹John Ober, telephone interview with author, May 5, 1997.



“I DIDN’T REMEMBER INDIANAPOLIS AT ALL. BUT I REMEMBERED THE MONUMENT” (SOLDIERS AND SAILORS MONUMENT ON THE CIRCLE).

Courtesy Gary Yohler and Frederick Vollrath,
Tiffany Studio, *Indianapolis Times* Collection.

sound system failed on the closed circuit telecast at the beginning of the program, but I am sure that you are well aware of the fact that ‘usual’ is not the order of the day where Mr. Wright is concerned.”¹⁰

Wright’s Indianapolis visit was filled with his usual quips and barbs. Media accounts of the day recorded some of his Wright-isms. In recalling his 1938 visit to the city, the architect observed: “I didn’t remember Indianapolis at all. But I remembered the monu-

¹⁰Herbert P. Kenney, Jr., “Architect Would Junk Memorial,” *Indianapolis News*, November 4, 1957; John E. Brown to Eugene Masselink, November 11, 1957 (Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives).



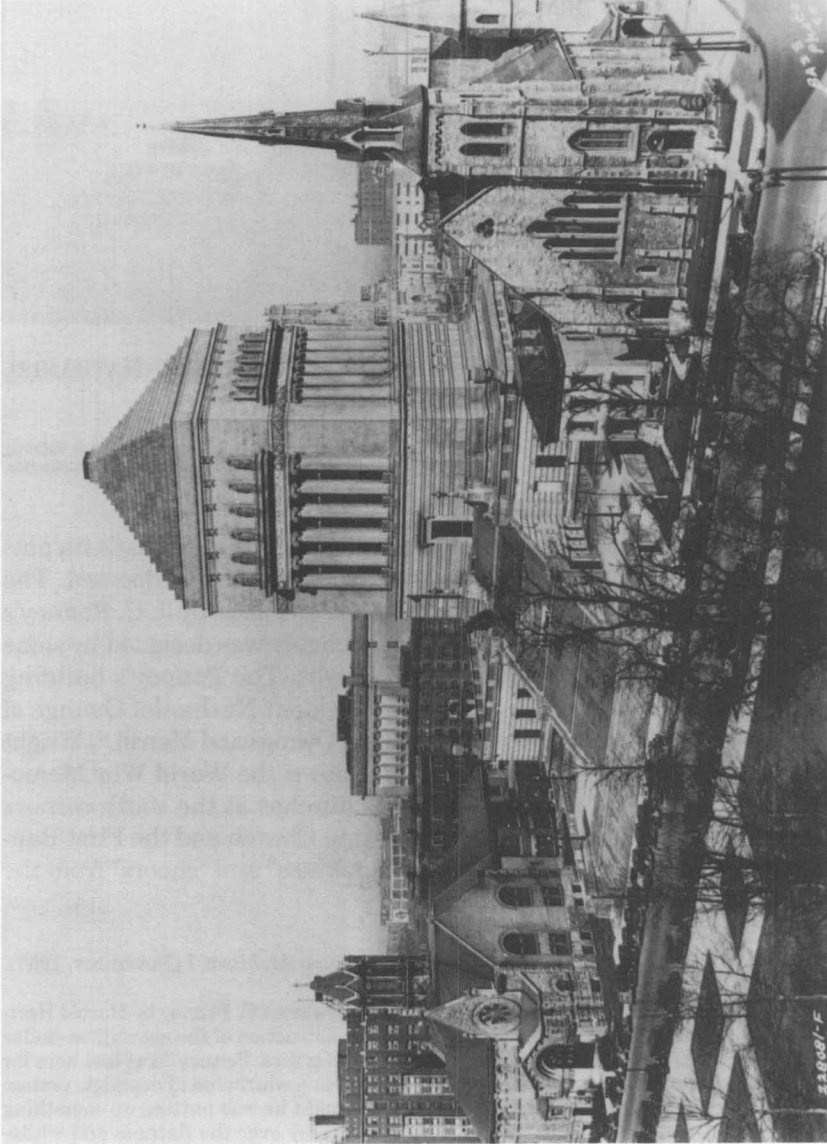
THE “RADICAL” J. C. PENNEY BUILDING, DESIGNED BY NATHANIEL OWINGS, ON MONUMENT CIRCLE

Courtesy Gary Yohler and Frederick Vollrath,
Tiffany Studio, Indianapolis *Times* Collection.

ment (Soldiers and Sailors Monument), and I suppose that’s its purpose.” He added, “Indianapolis, like every big city, is doomed. The only good building I saw downtown is the one used by J. C. Penney’s downtown, which is a little radical. It probably was designed by some out-of-town man.”¹¹ (Wright was half right. The Penney’s building was designed by former Indianapolis resident Nathaniel Owings of the Chicago architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.¹²) Wright also thought it would be better to tear down the World War Memorial, “a gray mass,” and save the two churches at the south corners of the memorial—the Second Presbyterian Church and the First Baptist Church. This comment brought “applause” and “cheers” from the

¹¹ “Noted Architect Awes Indianapolis,” *Indiana Architect*, I (November, 1957), 5.

¹² According to a typed draft of an obituary for James C. Penney by Harold Hartley, the Indianapolis *Times* business editor, the construction of the six-million-dollar J. C. Penney store on the Circle was not without its critics. Penney “was last here for the opening of the Penney building which replaced in a whirlwind of nostalgic protest the old English Theater and Hotel. He said he thought he was putting up something fine. And he was sensitive to the ripple of controversy over the flatness and whiteness of his building.” Indianapolis *Times* Photograph Collection (Tiffany Photography Studio, Indianapolis).



THE "GRAY MASS" OF THE WORLD
WAR MEMORIAL, AT VERMONT AND
MERIDIAN STREETS, SANDWICHED
BETWEEN THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
(LEFT) AND THE SECOND PRESBY-
TERIAN CHURCH (RIGHT)

Bass Photo Company Collection.
Indiana Historical Society Library,
Indianapolis
(Neg. no. 228081F).

capacity audience.¹³ (Both churches, unfortunately, were demolished a couple of years later.)

As to the future of Indianapolis, Wright waxed prophetic: "We've got to devise another way of life, leave the city and live in the country again. Greening is essential to our souls. There is only one course for people to pursue. Decentralization. We must recognize the nature of the thing we are in."¹⁴ He continued: "Everything moves faster now. A hundred years long ago is 10 years in today's mode of progress. Can't you see this city going out (to the suburbs)? And when it does, you'd better get out of the way."¹⁵

Further documenting Wright's eccentricities, one newspaper reported that during a book signing session the architect refused to sign copies of a bound collection of his work if there were any pages missing.¹⁶ And in discussing the status and design for his Illinois Mile-High Skyscraper project, Wright remarked, "My Mile High building is just simmering now. As long as I don't try to get some one to build it there's no one to say it's no good."¹⁷ Yet despite his often curt, off-the-cuff comments about Indianapolis architecture, it was noted that he thought the Weir Cook Municipal Airport was "very nicely designed."¹⁸

Controversial and often misunderstood, Wright evoked differing opinions among local officials, architects, and the news media. Some, like architect Wilbur B. Shook of McGuire and Shook opposed Wright's contention that Indianapolis would be "on the way out" within the next fifteen years. Shook countered: "downtown Indianapolis is the heart of our thriving urban and fine supplemental suburban development . . . the life-giving heart of Monument Circle."¹⁹ Others found common ground with the master architect's arguments. An Indianapolis *Star* article of November 10, 1957, contained a photograph of a downtown scene with the caption, "Bleak View of Downtown Indianapolis—Frank Lloyd Wright had a point." And Alfred J. Porteous of Vonnegut, Wright, and Porteous agreed with Wright's comments concerning the World War Memorial: "It's a huge mass of state architecture." Suggesting a constructive approach in dealing with Wright's observations, architect Edward D. Pierce responded,

¹³ Kenney, "Architect Would Junk Memorial."

¹⁴ "Cities On Way Out?—Get Out of the Way, Noted Architect Quips," Cincinnati *Enquirer*, November 13, 1957.

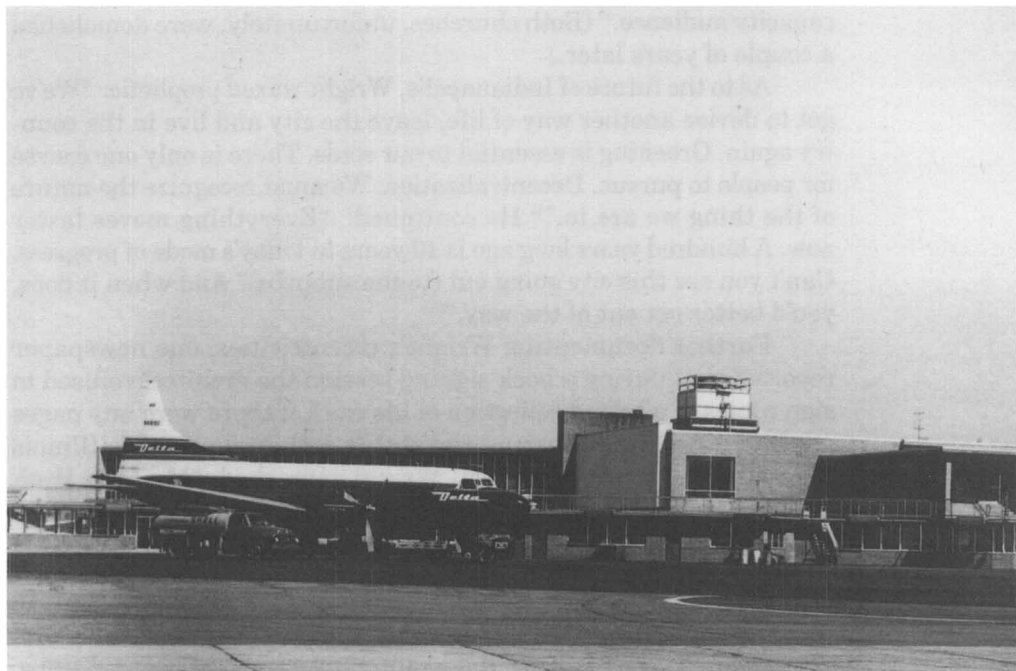
¹⁵ "Noted Architect Awes Indianapolis," 5.

¹⁶ Kenney, "Architect Would Junk Memorial."

¹⁷ "Noted Architect Awes Indianapolis," 5.

¹⁸ "Famed Architect Pays Visit With Usual Barbs," Indianapolis *Star*, November 3, 1957. The Indianapolis Weir Cook Municipal Airport terminal building was designed by Indianapolis architect Edward D. James, AIA, and was completed in 1956. Indiana Biography Series, vol. LVIII, p. 75, vol. LXIX, p. 30 (Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).

¹⁹ Wilbur B. Shook, "Local Architect Answers Mr. Wright," *Indiana Architect*, I (November, 1957), 9.



INDIANAPOLIS WEIR COOK MUNICIPAL AIRPORT, c. 1957,
DESIGNED BY EDWARD D. JAMES.

"We can take two attitudes toward Wright's criticisms. . . . We can get angry, or we can find something constructive in it. The smart thing to do is look and see how much truth there is in what the man said and do something about it."²⁰

Epilogue: Although there are no Frank Lloyd Wright structures in the city of Indianapolis, the state of Indiana does have eight Wright-designed homes located in the northern part of the state: the DeRhodes residence (1906) in South Bend, the Moe residence (c. 1910) in Gary, the Wynant residence (c. 1916) in Gary, the Armstrong residence (1939) in Ogden Dunes, the Mossberg residence (1948) in South Bend, the Davis residence, "Woodside," (1950) in Marion, the Haynes residence (1950) in Fort Wayne, and the Christian residence, "Samara," (1954) in West Lafayette. The Davis and

²⁰ Paul M. Doherty, "Beautifying Indianapolis Downtown Business Area Possible . . . Architects Say Careful Planning Needed in Zone," *Indianapolis Star*, November 10, 1957.



Bass Photo Company Collection,
Indianapolis Historical Society Library, Indianapolis
(Neg. no. 295031-1).

Christian houses are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The DeRhodes house is included on the National Register as being a significant structure in the West Washington Street Historic District in South Bend.