

The 'Wright' stuff: Frank Lloyd Wright discussion at the Darwin D. Martin House

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Panelists discuss importance of Frank Lloyd Wright and modern architectural criticism

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By [Zach Mazzochetti](#) / The Spectrum

On Friday night, journalists and fans of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture joined together for an insightful discussion on Wright's work. They discussed the relationship between architectural criticism and Wright.

Many UB Architecture students start and end their journey at the same place: Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin D. Martin House.

Wright has had a profound effect on the architectural world, designing over 1,000 structures, 532 of which were erected. Wright, who constructed buildings in Illinois, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Tokyo, had a fascination with the Queen City.

Behind Chicago, Buffalo is home to more Wright-designed structures than anywhere in the world.

The Darwin D. Martin House, Wright's prairie-style masterpiece in Buffalo, is an architectural hotspot for students, industry professionals and critics from around the world. It is also one of the few Wright structures in the world that is open to the public and offers tours.

Leading architectural journalists educated fans on Wright's long-lasting legacy to celebrate the American architect's 150th birthday.

A crowd of roughly 100 people, most over 50 years old, packed into the complex's Greatbatch Pavilion Friday night for a discussion of the dynamic relationship between the media and architecture, Wright's historic place in the field of architectural writing and the state of architectural criticism today.

Robert Shibley, professor and dean of UB's School of Architecture and Planning, moderated the evening's discussion. Shibley is also President Tripathi's representative to the Martin House Restoration Corporation. Panelists included Christopher Hawthorne, writer for the *Los Angeles Times* and Mark Lamster, writer for the *Dallas Morning News*. Inga Saffron, the night's third panelist couldn't attend due to last minute flight cancelations preventing her from traveling to Buffalo.

The discussion started with writers talking about their current work and thoughts on Wright's architecture.

Hawthorne entertained audience members with clips of his upcoming hour-long documentary on Wright's houses in Los Angeles. The documentary features historians and architects discussing the Hollyhock House, the Mallard House and the Ennis house.

"The Hollyhock House was Wright's first structure in LA. It was a transition between Wright's prairie-style houses to concrete block style," Hawthorne said. "Wright's houses in LA have been under-examined. It's amazing how anomalous they are compared to work in his early career."

Hawthorne continued describing the importance of Wright's efforts to make buildings in LA visually stunning, but easy to mass-produce. Buildings like the Mallard House used Mayan-style cement bricks, which Wright thought was the future of building in metropolitan cities.

"These cement blocks were light enough to be lifted and carried into place. Wright really wanted to make this the future of building," Hawthorne said. "He used dirt from the building location to incorporate into the cement mix. There was a big focus on organic architecture and natural features in his buildings."

Lamster's discussion focused on Wright's dilapidated structure: the Kalita Humphreys Theater. The structure, located in Dallas, has been rundown for years; similar to the Martin Complex before its \$50 million renovation.

"The theater is decrepit on the outside, but beautiful on the inside. It's a wonderful project, but we need about \$40 million to renovate it," Lamster said. "Nobody ever looked after it and we can't let such a beautiful structure go to waste."

Lamster's theory, "The Frank Lloyd Wright Paradox," discusses the fact that architects have thoroughly examined Wright's work and are still finding new angles to research and learn from. Lamster described Wright's style as a "square peg trying to fit in a round hole" compared to other architects of his time.

"This idea of Wright being a fountain of knowledge that keeps giving us information is extraordinary," Lamster said. "This is especially important for critics. Perspectives always change and it's important for us critics to constantly

reexamine his work. He was so far ahead of his time and people still don't know the importance of his work."

Shibley discussed the connection between UB's architecture students and the Martin House Complex.

"The Martin House Restoration Corporation is interested in finding ways to bring students and [young people] to the house," Shibley said. "From the houses perspective, no students should leave UB without touring it. Everywhere they go from here, around the world, they talk about the house and now you've got another market so it's part of a way to spread the word about the quality of this resource."

Shibley appreciates having such an architectural feat so close to campus for students to utilize.

"My school routinely does tours as part of orientation for all of our incoming freshman and we have a reception here for all our graduating students," Shibley said. "These kinds of opportunities are available through [UB] schools and departments that work with the staff here."

After the discussion was over, the panelists received a roaring applaud from the crowd. They took time to answer audience questions about Wright's work across the country and here in Buffalo.

Aaron Sylva, a recent UB graduate, enjoyed hearing the journalists' opinions on Wright and thought that the Martin Complex did a great job putting on the evening's event.

"Tonight was a perfect reflection of Wright's work and our current thoughts on who is arguably the first 'snarkitect.'" Sylva said. "It's uncommon to constantly look back on architects' works, but there's no one like Wright. We're constantly learning and re-learning from his work."

Shibley hopes more people take advantage of Buffalo's architecture and culture.

"You could tell from the depth of their exploration and their reach that they are quite knowledgeable," Shibley said. "So you bring the best and brightest in a number of categories to Buffalo and tonight we're meeting some of the best and brightest in architectural criticism and they taught us to take a look at Wright from a different perspective."

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