

WAITING FOR THE SITE TO SHOW UP

Daniel Naegele

Henry Luce, owner of Life, Time, Fortune and Architectural Forum in 1937, recognized Frank Lloyd Wright's immense talent, though clearly he did so for his own ends. Author of "The American Century" Luce needed an all-American poster boy for his campaign purposes. Despite Wright's immense unpopularity at the time, Luce featured him on the cover of Time and promoted him in his three other journals. That Luce's ideals were not those of Wright mattered little. Wright became the most popular American architect in history. But how very odd that decidedly artificial mediation could so effectively disseminate and popularize an architecture whose essence was authenticity.

"Ocatilla" was published in German magazines two months after it was finished. Thank the machine, at least, for this ubiquity of publicity. Prevalence of the idea in some graphic thought-form — certainly one of the best things the machine has done for us in this age.

-Frank Lloyd Wright¹

All media exist to invest our lives with artificial perception and arbitrary values.

-Marshall McLuhan²

THE PHOTOGRAPH

In November 1937, a 25-year-old Chicago architectural photographer Bill Hedrich — on assignment from *Architectural Forum* — traveled to a remote site in Western Pennsylvania to make pictures of a not-yet-completed vacation house built for a wealthy Pittsburgh retailer. (1)



1 Bill Hedrich's 1937 photograph of Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Fallingwater' as it appeared in *Life*, *Time* and *Architectural Forum* in January, 1938.

In the best known of these images, a modern, utterly unique house appears to float above moving water, detached from the world, mystically defying gravity. The view is not from the approach to the house or from within, but from the outside, downstream, a vantage point that renders the conceptual idea of the house in its entirety: an exclusive retreat alone in acres of wooded paradise; the magic of immense heaviness levitating; the Biblical metaphor of water from rock.

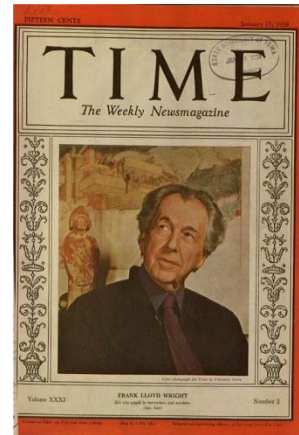
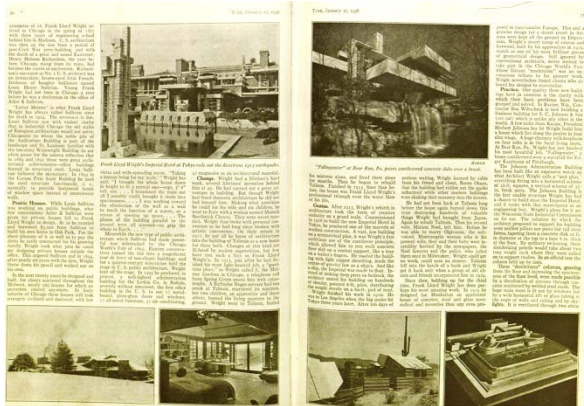
Carefully composed, the photograph is divided horizontally into two equal parts. In the upper half, the angelically white house hovers. In the lower half, a natural rock ledge in gray is underscored by a deep black crevice stretching from one side of the image to the other. In the center of the photograph, separating house from rock, is a waterfall — liquid light, blurred in its vitality, animating the lightness about it. The white planes of the house catch the shadows of the trees, enlarging the wooded surrounds.

Photography has portrayed the house as a phenomenon, a mirage-like apparition. The camera never lies.

THE PAGE

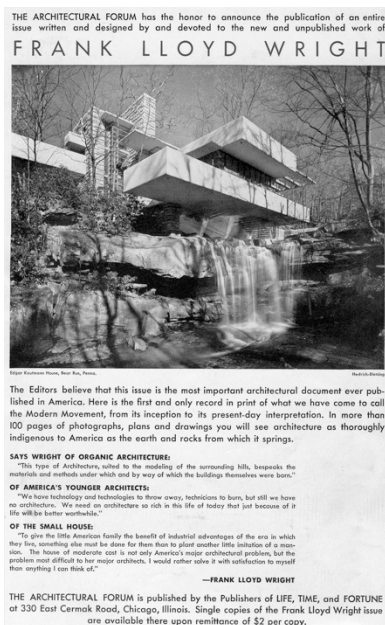
On January 17, 1938, the photograph was seen by millions when it was featured in *Time* and *Life*, two of America's leading weekly magazines. In *Time*, it was shown as a small image, one of many illustrating an article on its architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, whose portrait appeared on the cover accompanied by a color rendering of the house,

dubbed Fallingwater. (Fig.'s 2 & 3). In *Life*, it was featured prominently on the inside page of the magazine's dark cover, a cover that showed industrial tanks on barren land glowing beneath a near-black sky (Fig.'s 4 & 5)

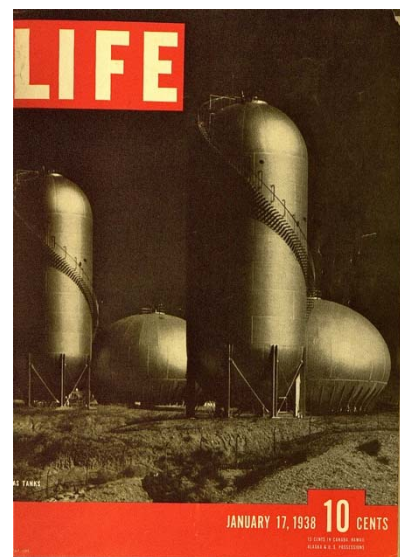


2 Double-page spread from the article on Frank Lloyd Wright in *Time*, February 17, 1938. Hedrich's photograph of Fallingwater is at the top of the second page.

3 The cover of *Time*, February 17, 1938.



4 The full-page 'advertisement' on the inside cover of *Life*, January 17, 1938



5 The cover of *Life*, January 17, 1938

An utterly modern house emerging from primitive woods above cascading water, the photograph dominated the upper half of page. Above it 'FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT' was stretched in thin modern red letters. Below it was printed, "The editors believe that this

issue is the most important architectural document ever published in America [...] the first and only record in print in what we have come to call the Modern Movement [...]”³

The lower half of the page was completed with three, boldly captioned, ‘says Wright’ statements — Says Wright of Organic Architecture, of America’s Younger Architects, of the Small House — in which Wright describes his architecture as organic, indigenous, opposed to unnecessary technologies and technologists, and happy to address “in these depressed times” the need of the ‘little American family’ to build for themselves a new way of living. “The house of moderate means,” one quote reads, “is not only America’s major problem, but the problem most difficult to her major architects. I would rather solve it with satisfaction to myself than anything other I can think of.”⁴

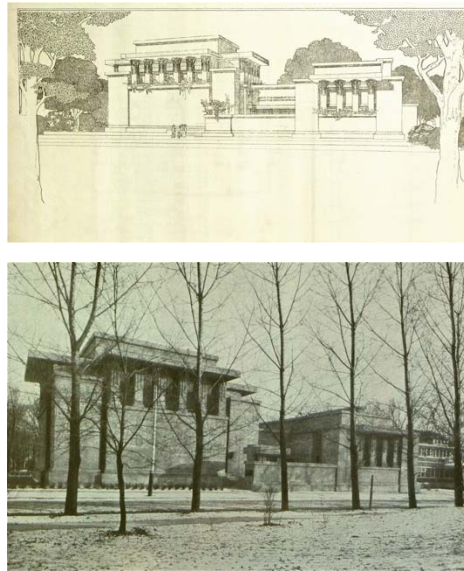
Though at first the page appears to be an exposé on Wright, in fact it is subtly construed advertisement. At the very top, unnoticed above the wondrous photograph, is printed: “The ARCHITECTURAL FORUM has the honor to announce the publication of an entire issue written and designed by and devoted to the unpublished work of [in bold red letters] FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT”. A note closes the page: “The ARCHITECTURAL FORUM is published by the Publishers of LIFE, TIME, and FORTUNE.”

THE ARCHITECT

Architectural Forum, *Life*, *Time* and *Fortune*, four of America’s most prominent periodicals in the late 1930s, were owned and published by Henry Luce. In January 1938, all four of these journals features articles or advertisements about Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright would have been well known to the American public then — more for his social indiscretions, though, than for his internationally acclaimed architecture. He was seventy years old at the time and ever since the age of forty-two had been mercilessly scorned and ridiculed by the popular press.

Twenty-nine years earlier, in 1909, Wright left his wife and six children in Oak Park to travel to Europe with his lover, Mamah Cheney, the wife of a client. He went first to Berlin then to Tuscany to prepare a monograph of his twenty years of exceptional work — domestic buildings on suburban sites, houses Wright had designed as ‘organic’.

"Architecture," he was fond of saying, "should grace, not disgrace, its site." The horizontality, even the naturalness of his houses then were at odds with both their vertical Victorian neighbors and the non-natural parcel of prepared land on which they were built. The inside opened out, but the suburbia that was outside could not be allowed in. Novel and aesthetically compelling, Wright's houses nevertheless did not grace but rather indicted their suburban site.



6 Wright's drawing of his Oak Park Unity Temple for the 1910 Wasmuth portfolio, and a photograph of that same building from the 'little Wasmuth' of 1911

So for Ernst Wasmuth, the German who would publish his work, Wright *drew* images of his houses — not as they were, but as he wanted them to be. In the drawings, he framed the houses in vegetal growth, showing them alone and removed from the company of the neighboring Victorian houses (Fig. 6). Published in 1910, the resulting 2-volume folio, luxurious and exclusive, was well received and was followed in 1911 by an inexpensive 'small Wasmuth' comprised not of fictive drawings but of photographs of the work (Fig. 7). The photographs could not do what Wright's drawings did so well, however. The camera easily edited out neighboring Victorian houses, but it could not put non-existent vegetation into the image. At that time, "the camera never lied" and works that in the drawn portfolio were cloaked in vegetation, in photographs — even

when camouflaged in dappled light — appear bare and remote. Not only did photography *not* render 'natural' Wright's suburban work, it often underscored the pathos of the natural house on a non-natural suburban site.



7 The cover of the July 1937 *Town & Country* designed by Frank Lloyd Wright

When Wright and Mamah Cheney returned to Chicago in the autumn of 1910, immediately they were ostracized by its polite society, the same society from which Wright's principal clients had come. Unwanted in the city, they removed themselves to the rolling hills of rural Wisconsin and there Wright built his first *natural* house, 'Taliesin'. When a servant burned down Taliesin in 1914, killing Mamah and several others, the popular press reported the story in detail day after day, one article suggesting that the mass killings were divine retribution for a life lived in sin.⁵

Wright left Taliesin for Tokyo two years later, returning in the early 1920s not to the Midwest but to Los Angeles, but he did not escape the press or its bias against him. Journalists reported on him and his turbulent love life wherever he went. And when at last he returned 'home' to Wisconsin in the mid-1920s, the journalists, one might say, were delighted. He was divorced from his first wife, estranged from a second, and intimately involved with the woman who would be his third — a married woman, half his age.

Wright's infamy continued into the 1930s, even as the Great Depression left him near destitute on the now crumbling estate he had built twenty years earlier.

But *who* was Henry Luce? And why would he have wanted to remove the infamous Frank Lloyd Wright from his unpopularity and place him on the cover of *Time* magazine?

THE PUBLISHER AND HIS AMERICAN ARCHITECT

Henry Luce, like Frank Lloyd Wright, was a self-made man. He, too, was a divorcee who in 1935 had married the renowned American socialite, Clare Booth. Born in 1898, at the age of twenty-three and only two years out of Yale, Luce quit his job and with his Yale colleague Briton Hatton began a weekly news magazine, a journal they called *Time*. Hatton died prematurely in 1929 and the following year Luce launched the business magazine *Fortune*. Later he acquired *Architectural Forum*, and in 1936 he created America's most successful pictorial magazine, *Life*.

Luce had been born in China and educated until the age of fifteen in English boarding schools. After graduating from Yale, he had studied for a year in England at Oxford University. Despite this foreign upbringing, in the mid-1930's, in the midst of the Great Depression, he began to exhibit tremendous patriotism for the U.S.A., a patriotism manifested most evidently several years later in 1941 when he wrote his now-famous "The American Century" for *Life* magazine.⁶ The article expressed Luce's belief that American values would dominate the Twentieth Century.

Frank Lloyd Wright must have appealed greatly to Henry Luce despite his well-publicized reputation with women. As an architect, he symbolized creative engagement with the world, the builder of modernity and a better way of life, the embodiment of hope. His past accomplishments were staggering, extending back nearly half a century. His current work in small-town America, of a size and kind that Luce's reader would understand and appreciate, was as great as any built anywhere at anytime. His confidence and youthful demeanor were indomitable even at seventy years of age when his sexual prowess — always a favorite target for journalists — was no longer of concern.

Perhaps more important than any of these qualifications to Luce, Wright believed in America and presented American culture to the world. In the Teens and early 1920s,

he had built in the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, a threshold between West and East, and on his return to Wisconsin, architects came from Europe, Japan and China to learn from him — to learn *architecture* from him, certainly, but also to learn of America from him.

"Young people had come from all over the world attracted by Taliesin's fame abroad as 'American,' to share its spirit [...]," he wrote in his 1932 autobiography, "for Taliesin was at work quietly Americanizing Europe while American architects Europeanized America."⁷

That same year, he initiated a school of architecture at Taliesin. The school farmed the land, grew its own food, and with boundless enthusiasm imagined a new America for the centuries to come. In 1936, he set about solving 'America's major problem' designing "the house of moderate means" for the "little American family", a project that *Life* would take up the following year. And in 1937, he designed a cover for the July issue of *Town & Country* showing a series of flattened red, white and blue American flags laid out in a signature Frank Lloyd Wright 30/60 field (Fig. 7).

Wright's belief in himself as an American, the importance he placed on being of America, was reflected in the rhetorical questions of a less than subtle Walt Whitman poem that accompanied images of his work in the January 1938 *Architectural Forum* Luce had commissioned:

*Who are you, indeed, who would talk or sing to America? Have you studied out the land, its idioms, and men? Have you learned the physiology, phrenology, politics, geography, pride, freedom, friendship of the land? Its sub-stratums and objects? Do you see those who would leave all feudal process and poems behind them—and assume the poems and process of democracy? Are you really very strong? Are you really of the whole people?*⁸

One can only speculate as to whom Wright was directing this interrogation, if to anyone specific at all. But in 1937, the German architects Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, both former heads of the renowned Bauhaus, moved to America to escape the oppressive Hitler regime that had overtaken their homeland. The following year Gropius was appointed chair of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, America's most prestigious school, while Mies was appointed chair of the Department of Architecture at

the Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago, Luce's hometown. Both Gropius and Mies represented "International Style" values made popular by New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Wright represented an organic architecture, homegrown in America, seemingly irrepressible.

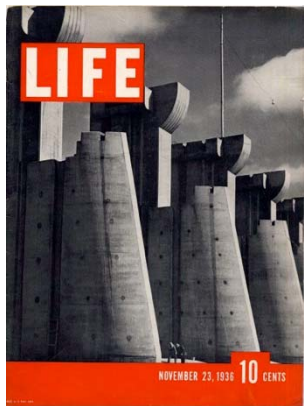
It was Wright who Luce chose to elevate to the position of 'America's Architect' in his *Life* and *Time* magazines. "In an era blighted by Depression, prejudice, social turmoil, and the shadow of war," Luce's biographer wrote seventy-five years later, "*Life* offered the comforting image of a nation united behind a shared, if contrived, vision of the 'American Dream'."⁹

JUST ADD WATER

One might simply let it go at that. The Chicagoan Henry Luce, who believed adamantly in his country and its destiny, and whose tremendously influential journals sought to please and gently direct the sensibilities of a broad and varied America, put forth Wright as 'America's Architect', despite, or perhaps to counter, the adulation of the Eastern academic establishment for European architects newly arrived from a country that would soon become America's enemy. Luce promoted Wright in his four prominent journals in January 1938; and one imagines that the American public was persuaded. Bill Hedrich's photograph of Fallingwater in particular--a magnificent picture of a house in harmony with free-flowing nature--was the visual summation of a philosophy that Wright had sought for thirty years. But Wright's philosophy seemed somewhat at odds with that which *Life* persistently portrayed.

At the height of the Great Depression, in the mid-1930s, tremendous flooding followed years of drought and famine across America and it was at this time that Luce inaugurated *Life*. As general policy, in the 1930s, *Life* presented news to America as hope. On the front cover of its very first issue, in November 1936, *Life* featured a photograph by Margaret Bourke-White of an immense dam at Ft. Peck, in Montana (Fig. 8). Government-built by the Public Works Administration, the dam controlled the waters of the Missouri, preventing the disastrous flooding that so often had plagued the area.

The dam was a physical symbol, an immense manifestation of highly advanced technology capable not only of controlling an often-destructive force but of providing electricity to thousands of inhabitants in the rural area that surrounded it. What once was feared had been harnessed. Undeniable good came from the control of nature. Immediately *Life* presented this metaphor visually, its disaster photographs persistently reminding the reader of the need for control (Fig. 9).

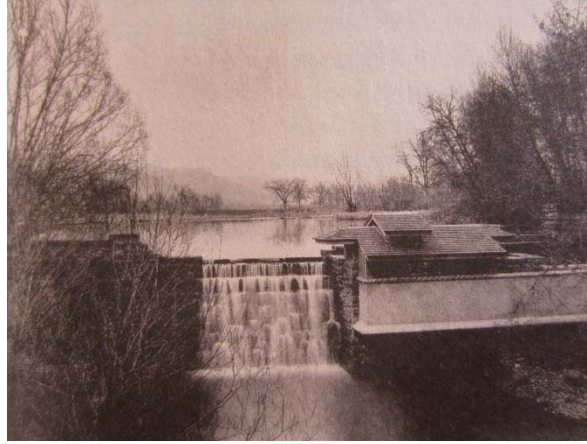


8 The cover of the November 23, 1936. 1936 *Life* featuring Margaret Bourke-White's photograph of Norris Dam.



9 *Life* photograph of house washed down the Ohio River,

Yet *Life's* promotion of Frank Lloyd Wright seemed to question such control. To Wright, Nature and life were synonymous.¹⁰ To harness Nature was to harness life. Man should not dominate Nature, but respect and live in harmony with it, a belief Wright had manifested in his buildings for many years. In his residences, rainwater was encouraged to envelope the building, creating sheets of liquid light that veil the habitat, transforming it while making evident the workings of nature—a phenomenon he enlarged in 1925 when he dammed a branch of the Wisconsin River to build a 'hydroelectric house' at Taliesin (Fig. 10). The dam made manifest the presence of Nature in the form of a sublime, utterly beautiful cascade. It visually objectified Nature, but in a manner that Wright would amend in 1937.



10 The hydroelectric house and dam at Taliesin, 1925

At Fallingwater, Nature is similarly made present though without being geometricized. Clearly Wright had considered modifying the look of the waterfall (Fig. 3), but ultimately decided to against it, leaving it alone and magically suspending the house above it instead. In the built work, waterfall and building, separated though visually aligned, give presence to one another. Hedrich's photograph captures this condition exactly, presenting us with Wright's way of relating to Nature: that man should not dominate but live in harmony with and in the midst of 'Nature'.

In *Life's* portrayal, water is a commodity, its potentially harmful power harnessed, converted to another medium, and directed to an assumed common good. In Wright's Fallingwater, water is a sensuous and life-giving force, natural, original, and replete with symbolic potential. It exists unaltered, enhancing the life of man with its beauty and the freedom of its liveliness.

SOME GRAPHIC THOUGHT-FORM

In this story, Wright is the tradition, the illustrated press the political entity that re-creates him for its own ends. Luce had chosen Wright to portray American ideals, to convey an unbridled hope in America's future at a time when many had little more than hope. Wright did that. His indomitable spirit was inspirational. Luce chose Wright. He foregrounded certain Wright characteristics that met his ends. Far from re-creating Wright, Luce resurrected him.

The “prevalence of the idea in some graphic thought-form,” Hedrich’s image of Fallingwater seen by millions in a single day, was the visual manifestation of an ideal for which Wright had been striving for over forty years. For over forty years, Wright had waited for the site to show up. The popular press, not the ground on which he built, *was* that site. Luce made that available to him. And though Wright seemed not to realize this at first, not to understand that finally a photograph had pictured the idea of his natural house, he understood well the effect of mass and immediate publication. He had resided in the popular press doghouse for nearly thirty year; now the same representation that had held him there rescued him. Both he and his masterpiece were known throughout America.

Wright became America’s most popular architect, an architect *of* the people, a status he retained for the remainder of his 91-year life and a status that he keeps today. That Wright believed in the American ideal but seldom in its reality, and that the American public did not, could not, know this, seemed to matter little either to him or to them. In their eyes, he became what he had believed himself to be since the turn of this, the ‘American Century’: an unsurpassed Master Builder; the creator of a natural architecture; a renegade sage, prophet, and visionary.

Mediation, investing “lives with artificial perception and arbitrary values” had allowed America to see what it would not have seen otherwise. In doing so, Wright’s decidedly ‘authentic’ architecture entered the realm of the artificial.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (NY: Longmans, Green and Company, 1932), p.306.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

³ *Life*, February 17, 1938, unpaginated, (inside cover).

⁴ *Life*, February 17, 1938, unpaginated (inside cover).

⁵ See, for instance, *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 16 August 1914, p.7. Headlines below these main headlines read: "NEGRO HELPER KILLS FAMILY WITH HATCHET / Architect in Chicago Hears of Crime and Goes to Scene / SLAYER CAPTURED." See also, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 August 1914, p.7. Headlines to two adjacent columns on this page read: "WRIGHT BURIES MAMAH OF HILLS IN NIGHT GRAVE / Rituals Ignored as Nephews and Son Help Architect Carry Open Coffin / ART IN BUNGALOW A RUIN" and "'THIS ENDS ALL,' SAYS E. H. CHENEY / Divorced Husband of Mamah Borthwick Brings Slain Children / WILL BE NO FUNERAL".

⁶ Henry Luce, "The American Century", *Life*, February 17, 1941, reprinted in *The Ambiguous Legacy*, M. J. Hogan, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*, p.258.

⁸ Walt Whitman, as published in *Architectural Forum*, January 1938.

⁹ Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p. 239.

¹⁰ Throughout this article I use an uppercase 'N' in referring to 'Nature' as Wright understood it. In 1957, when asked what church he attends in a televised interview with Mike Wallace, he replied, "I put a capital 'N' on Nature, and that's the church where I worship."