



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Arthur Cort Holden,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Arthur Holden on January 20, 1971. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's January 20, 1971 – Paul Cummings is talking to Arthur C. Holden. Well, how did this whole thing start? How did your involvement with Frank Lloyd Wright begin?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: I had had a couple of contacts with him before I had anything to do with the [Guggenheim] museum. Of course I knew that he had worked on the designs and I had seen preliminary publications of the designs, which as I recall it, came out in Architectural Forum. I remember discussing that one night with Howard Meyers, the publisher and editor of Architectural Forum. I knew also that a friend of mine, Clay Irons, of Irons & Reynolds, the builders, had told me about working with Mr. Wright to help him in formulating costs of a building of that type. And, of course, I knew Wright and had heard him speak. One time he came to address a group in New York supposed to be a meeting of those interested in better housing. There were many of the employees of the reasonably new New York Housing Authority there and a limited number of architects, they fired questions at him. He had that day taken pains to criticize public servants and had been rather haughty to them. He later described to me the fact that the way to start with an audience was to shock them. Well, he certainly did, and they piled into him. They asked him questions for a long while. In spite of my interest I refrained from saying a thing until they got to the end. The chairman said we have time for only one more question. I raised my hand and the chairman said, "Oh, I didn't see Arthur raise his hand before but we can give Mr. Wright another question." I said, "There's no need. I only want to ask Mr. Wright a question that I can ask him afterward." The chairman said, "What was that?" I said, "I wanted to ask him when he last read de Tocqueville's Democracy In America." Then Mr. Wright said, "What was that? What was that? Apparently he hadn't heard of de Tocqueville. Then he asked me why I recommended it. We got into a little discussion, I said I thought it was very important for all of us today to recall that de Tocqueville had written a chapter in the second volume which distinguished between the aristocratic way of proceeding and the democratic way, saying that in Europe they had to wait for the landed aristocratic to lead them, that they were accustomed to that, but that in America, de Tocqueville said, "there's never a tree falls across the road but the Americans form a committee to deal with it immediately." This seemed to amuse him. Later I found through a telephone call from one of my friends who had gone to dinner with Wright a few nights later that he was reading a book when they came in and my friend walked around the table to see what Frank was reading and it was de Tocqueville's Democracy In America. So my friend always teased me about having told Wright about that book.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the caustic comment he said about public servants that was said at this meeting?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Oh, he started out by saying that when you saw a public servant you should spit in his eye. Well now, that was a little too much for them and they really treated him badly. He later referred to the fact that I'd helped pull him out that night by diverting the discussion to talk about Democracy In America. At any rate he recalled that pleasantly. I believe that Irons in talking

with him said that he'd need an architect in New York because Wright wasn't registered at that time in New York and that he'd better get hold of a man who was thoughtful and honest, and at least I qualified as honest. Wright had had another contact with me because I happened to be chairman of a Committee on Planning Man's Physical Environment, which was on of the bicentennial conferences held at Princeton. Princeton had said, "In the various branches of science and art let us look not only back two hundred years but a hundred years ahead and you, the different committees are to bring in distinguished men in various branches." Wright was one of those invited. In fact, he was invited to make the – we had a dual debate at the final session after a public dinner; Mr. Wright spoke as the designer and Robert Moses as the administrator. Of course they had a set to with different points of view. It was rather amusing because later Frank said to me, "How did you happen to have us together?" we explained that we wanted the different points of view of the creative mind and the mind that carries the thing out and we thought that you two, each egoistic in his point of view – he jumped on me quickly and said, "I'm glad you said 'egoistic' not 'egotistic' because an egoist knows about it and an egotist just thinks he knows about it." He said, "You know I like to do my own thinking and I don't think people should be trammled by regulations." In fact, he said, "I'm the first American anarchist." And I said, "Oh, no, you're not because I have some book on the first American anarchist." "Who is that?" asked Frank. And I said, "Joseph Warren." I showed him the book. And he said, "I'm very much interested. I'd like to know more about him. If you ever come across the books send them to me." well, later on I did. He was very interested in it and read it and, in fact, gave some talks on it. Which caused some suspicion in the neighborhood. People didn't quite know what he was talking about or what was his point of view. But of course Frank Wright preeminently was an individualist in thinking, thought that the individual should go on his way, do his own thinking, and be his own policeman that he didn't need outside policing in the ideal. That was a very interesting point of view.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It requires a certain responsibility to handle that. How long was there between these various meetings and the beginning of the association with the museum project?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Well in the early part of 1947 the conference at Princeton was held. It must have been towards the end of that year that one day I had a telephone call from Wright. He said, "Arthur, can you come over?" I said, "Where are you?" He said, "At the Plaza." I apologized because I was with a client. He said, "Come over. Within the next half hour will be all right." I went over there. He was in Mr. Guggenheim's suite, which was on the second floor, it went across the whole Fifth Avenue side of the Plaza Hotel, and there he had all of his then modern art. When I got there the door was open. I walked in. There wasn't a soul in the place. After walking down the whole length of the building and coming back, I heard singing in the hall and in came Frank Lloyd Wright. He said, "Oh! You got here sooner than I expected you. I went out for a sandwich." Then he said, "You'd better look at this stuff while we're talking." We walked through and I said, "Now listen, I'm color blind and I don't understand all of what the modern people are trying to do. I can see they're working on something in colors." He said, "Well, perhaps some of those that are a little more architectural than the others you could appreciate." We stopped before one and he said, "Do you see something in that?" I said, "Yes." And then we sat down and he said that Mr. Guggenheim wanted to go ahead with part of the museum but he felt that prices were too high and that it would be best merely to build what was going to be the annex, which was more or less of a square box on the rear of the property on 88th Street behind the apartment house which was thirteen stories high and a gore into the property which was owned by the foundation. He said that Mr. Guggenheim had given his consent and he had the plans and he would like to have me study them and see that they conformed with the New York building code and make such recommendations of what would need to be changed for exit facilities or anything that I could inform him about. He agreed that we should associate on the work and that I was to help in expediting the thing through the Building

Department. He said he'd be back in New York in two or three weeks. When he came back I showed him a little diagram, a small sheet of paper not more than two feet square in which I had shown his annex with three studies for three different solutions for changing the stair and the exits and bringing them into conformity with the law. He looked at it without making any comment for fully a minute and a half and then he looked up and said, "I think distinctly, unquestionably that B is the best and furthermore I think it improves the design." Now that was so unlike anything that had been reported to me otherwise of his general characteristics and self-assurance I felt that he was a big enough man to appreciate anything and bend to adapting himself, as he would have to do, and I had great faith that we would go ahead. Well, as a matter of fact, while we started out with this Mr. Guggenheim felt that prices were too high, and I remember a meeting we had with the Baroness Rebay and Wright, and I was there and they discussed a meeting, as I remember Frank Wright had had with Mr. Guggenheim in which he had put his foot down and said, "You just can't go ahead. It's too expensive." I think they later regretted that, except that by waiting the Foundation was able to acquire at a later date the corner, which cleared the whole block. Now that is very important because on 88th Street the property was deeper and there was a better opportunity for building the beautiful ramp concept of the Museum. We talked it over with Wright and he was very enthusiastic and agreed that it would be better to reverse the museum and he got the permission of the trustees to change, although he didn't have much sympathy for them for the expenses that he was to be put in re-drawing the plans for a different site. But he was enough interested in it. He told me that the trustees were not sympathetic to taking care of his costs, saying that his contract was simply to deliver a building at a particular price as stipulated in Mr. Guggenheim's will. Mr. Guggenheim had died by that time. It's hard for me to remember all the correct chronological sequence. The Foundation owned the building next to the apartment house, which prior to its acquisition was an old private residence, converted by another architect into temporary use for the works of art Mr. Guggenheim had collected so that he could bring them away from the Plaza Hotel and exhibit them on the Fifth Avenue site. North of the private house, which adjoined the apartment house, the houses had been demolished and the whole area paved as a parking lot that was used exclusively by the Foundation. Now during the waiting period, and incidentally the waiting period was prolonged because although the design had been worked out for the annex, the construction of the proposed annex on 88th Street contemplated taking down the rear extension of the private residence, but in converting it into a temporary museum no thought had been given to Mr. Wright's intentions. In fact, it was then found to be impossible to tear down the rear part of the private residence and temporary museum because that would have cut off the exit facilities and absolutely upset the continuity of the exhibit. So there was a definite conflict in that way. The extension of the exhibit space was impossible. At about that time, and I do not know how the arrangements were made, but the proposition was advanced that a temporary pavilion be erected on the parking lot and a special exhibition of Mr. Wright's architectural work be given in that pavilion and that the pavilion include a specially-designed private house which would be a demonstration residence for New York City. Mr. Wright's idea was that the shelter could be built in which his architectural work would be shown by pipe stanchions such as were used, a patented device, for scaffold to replace wood scaffold. These were in the market and the manufacturers were anxious to have them used in that way. Mr. Wright asked that I take charge of filing the plans, which were necessary even for this temporary pavilion and told me to take it up with the Building Department. The department was interested but pointed out that they couldn't take the responsibility for actually using pipe sections which were only screwed together with union joints and things of that kind in a building that would have to carry a roof; and suggested that I associate with me a structural engineer of repute in the city, and that the department would leave the responsibility for its strength, stability, and safety of the building to me as architect plus the engineer. We went to Elwin Seeley and he was very glad to cooperate. As a matter of fact, the temporary pavilion was built adjoining the model house and it made a lovely exhibit. There were some troubles in that

because one little thing had been omitted. Frank had a great laugh at Elwin Seeley because Frank had designed the roof with an eccentric slope and just the weight of the structure began to push some of these pipe stanchions out of line. Frank made a great to do that he had especially hired technical people to do this and they had neglected to take care of the eccentric load that this design called for. Then again we had trouble because the Guggenheim Foundation threw the whole responsibility on Mr. Wright for handling the exhibit and for getting the building demolished. But the Building Department before it finished required that some welds be added to the screw joints in the pipe stanchions. As a result, while the company that had furnished this temporary equipment found that their material was ruined and Mr. Wright was in the hole, nobody wanted to take it down and it remained standing until after we had had unfortunately a very early snow of six to eight inches and the snow began to make the roof bend and there was great alarm. Part of that was thrown on me to get it down. Wright's exhibit was very, very popular. It was at that time that one of his dear friends in the profession, Oscar Stornoroff, who was killed in the airplane accident with Walter Reuther, said to me that two of the finest minds he'd ever encountered were Walter Reuther and Frank Lloyd Wright's: he felt that they had better mental equipment than any two men he'd ever met. Let me tell you of the period of the work on the temporary museum and the exhibit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Frank Wright had been working on the permanent design for the Museum with the reverse ramp on 88th Street and the plans had been filed in the department. It's very interesting what was involved. I tried, so to speak, to run interference for Mr. Wright. I knew the building commissioner, who was then Barney Gilroy. I called him up and said that I was about to file an unusual building and that before doing so I would like to get the advice of the department on how to proceed because it is undoubtedly would require deviations and special rulings respecting both the building code and zoning laws of New York. Mr. Wright had furnished me with a set of the drawings. I was given authorization to go to the Department and hold a preliminary conference. Commissioner Gilroy called in the superintendent for the Borough of Manhattan, who at that time was Arthur Benline, succeeding Herman who had worked with us on the temporary exhibit plans. He called in Asadore M. Cohen, popularly known as I. M. Cohen who, he pointed out, was one of the ablest, if not the ablest, examiner in the Building Department, a man who, on one hand was a trained engineer, and on the other hand a rabbi; a man of great character. Barney Gilroy said to him, "Can you do a little extra work on the side? Can you take a special interest in this? Here's a special type of building and it's very interesting what we might be able to make of it. Here's Mr. Holden, who is acting with Mr. Wright to help him get this plans filed and approved." I was asked to leave a set of blueprints in the Department. It was agreed that Mr. Cohen would study them, then informally get together with me, and give some advice on how to proceed. I think this was very, very helpful because after we had one or two conferences he pointed out to me that there were certain features that possibly could be adapted that would require any formal rulings if Mr. Wright agreed to do them, others could be recommended for approval by the examiner but would have to go to the superintendent, that some would have to go to the commissioner and a general meeting by the engineers of the Building Department and call for special rulings. Other classifications would be those which would have to go to what in New York is called the Board of Standards and Appeals, the authority established by law to grant an actual variation of the strict legal requirement where the strict ruling of the law would work a hardship on the owner, or something that would be plainly unintelligent, and where the board would have a power to grant a deviation from the strict interpretation of the ruling. That would be a very special classification and involve an appeal to the board after other matters had been adjusted in the Department. Then there was in addition a small number of items particularly where the slope of the ramp, the curl of the ramp projected over the street. Of course no public building can project over the street except by special ordinance passed

by the city legislative so that some items might have to go to the Board of Estimates. Mr. Cohen assisted in classifying these items and cataloguing them and together we went carefully into them. It was agreed that when Mr. Wright came to New York I should take him down to the Department and we would have a conference there and explain to him what was necessary. It was very interesting because I thought that I had better take him down in a taxi and be sure we got there at the appointed hour. Thinking that I might have difficulty I picked up a taxi before I got to the Plaza Hotel and asked the man to wait. I explained to the taxi man that I was going down to the Building Department and I wanted him to go to the East River Drive and wait there and not to worry about it but I was taking Mr. Wright—the taxi man immediately knew who Mr. Wright was. There are not many people among the taxi group who would know the names of architects, but he knew Mr. Wright's name and was very anxious to wait and take him down to the Building Department. The taxi man lost an ear all the way down listening to Mr. Wright's comments. One interesting comment – as we passed the United Nations Wright was leaning over and looking out the window. I said, "What are you thinking?" He said, "I'm thinking it is the apotheosis of the party wall signifying division." That's exactly what he said. I suppose he alluded to the fact that the north and south walls of the great Secretariate building are black walls. The taxi man of course was very much amused. When we got to the Building Department we repeated the description to Barney Gilroy and that was the beginning of the conference – Mr. Wright's opinion of the United Nations. They explained to him that they would do everything possible to help. I should continue to have meetings and to communicate with Mr. Wright either on his visits to New York or write to him at Taliesin in regard to what he could change. The concept he had of the building was very remarkable because he wanted to bring in the public and take them up in the elevator to the top floor. Incidentally, he wanted to have the enclosure of the elevator glass so that going up in the elevator there was a vision of the great openness of the Museum and he desired when they got to the top they would come out and walk down the ramp and they'd circle around always having a view of the great open space in the center and always having the feeling that there was light pouring in from the skylight in the center over the open space and that the exhibit was always continuously in view of the whole Museum but the view on the ramp would look at a particular part of the exhibit as you passed it. This of course brought him into contact with the code because the code is conceived with the idea of a building, not with a continuous ramp floor but of various floors and that those floors are connected by staircases, which are shut off by self-closing doors and sealed from smoke. Mr. Wright pointed out that the spread of fire would be protected against the fact that the whole thing was so open that if any fire originated it would go up in the center and that people on the ramp would be safe. Nevertheless, of course, the law said that there should be more than one means of egress and the distances of any point in the building from a means of egress were very specifically described in the code. So that the whole problem was to adapt the literal requirements of the code insofar as possible to the exigencies of a building designed under an entirely different conception. I think the Building Department recognized that it was a challenge. And it was my experience that there was not a member of the staff that didn't do all they could to point out the most economical, the most desirable, the safest and the best way to adapt the design, or help in adapting the design to the eccentricities of the code which was written for a completely different concept of building. For example, Mr. Wright had also made a few subsidiary ramps as an escape and also as an approach to the other parts of the building, the office part of the building on the northerly side. I tried to point out that because of the definition of a ramp in the code and the very low slope permitted in the code, because there was no expectancy that ramps would be used so extensively, that he could adapt some of them to actual staircases with ordinary treads and risers. He was not anxious to do this. However, as we proceeded in order to keep some of the spirit of the building – one example was the approach to the lecture room in the basement. In bringing some of these things up to him I remember making a special trip to Taliesin and putting up to him the limits of what the ramps were. After discussing it with me in the morning and after having his luncheon and having

his nap after lunch he agreed to come back to the problem. The whole stage was set for him at Taliesin. A blazing fire built in the hearth, a table put up for us. But, no, he wanted to sit right down where the particular drawing that was concerned that had to be changed and he insisted on sitting right down there where he wanted to work. and he puzzled, he went to work on it himself while I sat there and watched him and evolved the idea of putting an additional small mezzanine floor and a little balcony in his theatre and he took the hurdles that had been imposed by the building code and really added particular charm to his theatre. And I saw it happen right before my own eyes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Could we say something about James Sweeney and the Baroness Hilla Rebay and other people or trustees who were spoken to or involved?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: To talk about the Baroness Rebay and her part in the evolution of the design I'd have to go back because she had unquestionably worked with both Mr. Wright and Mr. Guggenheim long before I had any connection to the work. several times I did act as an intermediary in getting her approval, or rather attempting to get her approval. She did not read plans easily but when she conversed with me she could get from me what she wanted. Frank was very reticent to have me talk to people. I think that I only talked one or two times with her when he was not present. And then he asked me not to meet with her except in his presence. The same with the trustees. They wanted to have a meeting and wanted to ask some questions and I did go to one meeting. But again he wanted me to visit the trustees only in his presence. I did meet with him and the trustees on time and I must say that he took a little advantage of me because obviously in turning the plans over he turned over the sheets rapidly hardly giving them a chance to study them and a layman does not take in from a blueprint or a drawing as quickly what is represented by lines and diagrams and dimensions as a professional trained architect. And I could feel that the trustees didn't have a real opportunity to grasp what Mr. Wright was trying to show them. Again I noticed that when James Sweeney succeeded the Baroness Rebay as the director of the Museum he sent for me one day. He asked me to come and see him, and said quite frankly, "Now I cannot be sure that I know what I'm doing when I'm confronted with blueprints unless somebody tells me how to read them and I would like to have you here." I told him very frankly that Frank had felt that he was the architect and that I should not pretend to speak for him. and so I had to refuse. Subsequently Jim Sweeney hired somebody else to come in and interpret the drawings to him and joked with me about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder what Wright would have said about that.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Well, he knew about it. Jim Sweeney had a delicious sense of humor and was perfectly delightful to deal with. He could appreciate Wright, appreciate what he wanted but he did want Mr. Wright to go further into the problems of the museum director and what the museum director had to provide for, particularly in storage. He discussed some of these things with me and asked me to help him. I as not able to do very much of that kind because Frank's idea was that he was the architect and he could provide what was needed and it was his business to do that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know that for a while they had a restaurant and that was turned into a library and the library was moved upstairs. There have been a lot of changes over the years.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Well, I can't tell you a good deal of that. Mr. Wright would joke frankly with me from time to time about what I did for him and how I could help him. One time he said, "Arthur, I would like to have you as my clerk of the works but you'd be too expensive. I couldn't afford it." And he would continually say things of that nature. Ultimately he hired to be his clerk of the works Bill Short whom he had met as one of our staff. Bill had withdrawn from our office and was available at the time Mr. Wright asked him to help as clerk of the works. He took the job and did it as far as I

know – I'm sure he did a very excellent job representing Wright and he carried the building through to the end.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did Wright ever make comments to you about the kind of art that was going into this building, or his lack of interest or interest in the art that was going into the building? Or didn't that concern him very much? Or did it ever come up?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: I don't know that he took a detailed interest in it. I think he felt that if he created an atmosphere that he wanted to create and which gave a comprehensive view of the whole assembly as a museum with the opportunity to pass quietly by while walking down the ramp and see the details of the exhibits that in theory was right. And it was, and is a great concept. Talking to Jim Sweeney after the first exhibit (and this was after Mr. Wright's death), Jim Sweeney pointed out that the curved walls, the fact that the ramp was going down all the time, presented a very great obstacle to the museum technician who was trying to show his paintings or even sculpture, and show them well lighted. Sweeney did hit upon the idea of projecting all of the exhibits away from the curved walls. Sweeney set them that way for the first exhibit. And it was a phenomenal show the opening night. I can remember that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. So can I. Were there other people involved that you had anything to do with besides Sweeney and Rebay, or were they really the only two? Mr. Guggenheim died so there was not a great deal of –

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: I never met Mr. Guggenheim. I do remember one particular. Frank and I had been talking one day I said to him, "Really, this site is too cramped for the museum. It ought to be out on one of the great rolling parkways outside the city and it ought to be set among trees." Well. Frank had always taken the point of view that being opposite Central Park the natural surrounding of the park or the environs of the park contributed to the museum and were of its setting. But it was so set about with tall buildings and apartments and only a little space available for planting near the museum at all that he at once recognized that if he could only do that it would really be a great and worthy setting for his museum. I know that he asked Mr. Guggenheim because one day he said to me, "Arthur, you don't get your wish. I have talked it over with Mr. Guggenheim and he wants it there on Fifth Avenue on the land which he has and he wants it not too far from the great Metropolitan Museum. And that's why he has this land and he says he's going to put it there. It would be lovely in a more rural setting."

PAUL CUMMINGS: It would look very different with space around it and not the high buildings.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: There's no question about that. And I think Wright felt it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he ever comment about doing a building this late in his career in New York City? Because it's amazing; he was – what – in his late seventies or something at the time he started?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: I think he had his eightieth birthday while we were working together. And I just had my eightieth birthday. I don't feel so awfully old now. And I'm sure he didn't feel old. I know I frequently met him in town and walked with him, took him to the University Club, which he used to enjoy doing. I remember walking through the Plaza Hotel one day when they had some scaffolding up and he said to me, " Oh dear me, I hope they're not going to spoil Henry Hardenberg's best piece of work by trying to modernize it." Now I heard him say that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous.



ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: He liked the University Club, the atmosphere of the University Club very much. And I'm sure he admired McKim's work. Once he made some remark about the differences in the heights of the ceilings but he loved the space and he loved the coloring of it. And he liked to go there with me. I remember one day he had a date to go somewhere else and he went out and said he'd catch a taxi. And I was really alarmed at a man of his age grabbing a taxi and jumping into it so quickly. I do the same thing myself and I don't think anything of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let me ask you then about Wright's talking to builders? There was one marvelous story you mentioned yesterday about his calling builders.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Builders? Oh no, I really had no part in any negotiations with builders. But I did sit in one day when I was with him at the Plaza Hotel. And he called up one of the great builders in New York who specializes in concrete. As I remember it was Corbett. Wright said to him on the phone that he'd like to interest him in doing the Museum but the trustees only had the amount stipulated in Mr. Guggenheim's will - \$2,000,000. He was sure that the building would cost more and that a builder ought to be willing to invest at least \$1,000,000 in public relations for the sake of building the building and that if he would just agree to finish the building he could get him \$2,000,000 even if it cost the builder \$3,000,000. Of course it was an amusing conversation. He also talked to Corbett about the great schemes he had. At that time I think he had been voted by the town of Madison, Wisconsin to be the architect for their civic center. A part of that was a great projection over the lake. It was really a great concept. If they could have afforded it, it would make visitors come to Madison from far and near to see it. I was asked by some people whether I thought it was possible. I said that if they could raise the money and they could build it, it would really make Madison one of the sights of the world. Wright had a great flair for vision and public relations. He liked to talk on television. I was present one night when he did. In fact, we made for him a little cardboard model which was a ramp cut out of cardboard which of course would flop all to pieces until we inserted in the corners just as he had designed for the museum the verticals which when inserted in the cardboard made it rigid. And it was really a demonstration of the security of the museum. Incidentally, in the connection I think I ought to pay tribute to Frank's son-in-law, Wesley Peters, who did the engineering calculations. Wesley Peters came to New York and stayed with me in my house. I took him down to the Department and again the Department bought out their best engineers to sit and listen and work on and answer questions back and forth as to the engineering formulas, which had been employed. In fact, Peters bought with him Timoshenko's book of calculations, and I believe presented a copy to the Building Department, which they were very happy to receive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It must have been extraordinary engineering problems because there's hardly a straight line there, and curve and the floors and the ramps and the walls. It must have been an extraordinary project.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: As to some little personal anecdotes I made several visits to Taliesin East, which is in Spring Green, Wisconsin. It's near Madison. I'd spend a day or two at a time. There were various visitors at the same time that I was there. One of his former clients, Mr. Johnson, for whom he'd built both the Johnson plant in Racine and his own personal home. They exhibited a great appreciation for the intellect and originality and I'd say integrity of Mr. Wright. I particularly remember one time when he joined wholeheartedly – and I think we hardly talked about anything else – to try to prevent I think it was the Wisconsin State Highway Department from laying out a particular highway which was to go through one of the small towns between Spring Green and Madison. Wright lent himself to that with all the influence he could give trying to point out that it was a perfectly stupid thing to drive a big highway right through a little town when they could locate the bridge and run the highway around the town. The way he entered into that was something which

from point of view of public spirit and community. It showed his awareness of the need and understanding of our standards of life and the dangers that confronts us from too mechanical an approach to life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of appraisal would you make of your experience in working with him? – because you spent a number of years getting the Museum going, it started in 1947 and you were still working at it in the mid-fifties.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Well, I think we became very good friends and while occasionally he'd flare up and be impatient I think that's when you took him and quietly explained something and gave the practical and sensible reason, and particularly if you gave him a good engineering reason, he was very, very amenable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting because people with wild imaginations often won't sit still long enough to –

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: I remember one day being at Taliesin. Since I wake up early in the morning I went down to the main room. And there was Frank sitting at the piano and he was improvising. I just sat there in a chair. I suppose he played on for twenty minutes and he turned around and said, "Don't you think it's about time we had a cup of coffee?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: I didn't know he played the piano. Do you think the fact that this building has been built in New York City with all the building code and things will make it easier to do more innovative buildings like that?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: I discussed with Frank very frequently what he called his contempt for building codes. And I think that he, and I at the time felt that the attitude of the Department might have some effect in liberating codes. Since that time both the New York zoning law and the New York building code have been revised. I think there probably has been an advance in allowing discretionary powers and in allowing alternatives. But I question whether as much as might be hoped has been accomplished. In fact I think some of it is dangerous because with the type of speculative building with which our cities are afflicted and the overcrowding of land give a certain amount of liberality and then those who are looking out for getting all they can out of the land and crowding it as much as possible will use incentives, the supposed incentives, to gain another. As a matter of fact, we've intensified the use of land in our newer codes and newer zoning ordinance. At the same time that there has been liberalization there have been other requirements added so that the net result I do not think.... I think if Frank Wright were alive today he would be just as impatient with codes. I remember at the time we were working together I had begun to write a book on which I worked on very hard to try and put into some popular form of expression some of the needs in the relation between, let's say, the emotional, the aesthetic, the practical, and the financial. And I hit upon the idea of using a series of sonnets to express what was needed in the modern city. I think Frank was interested in what I was trying to do because he gave me the suggestion that I write a sonnet of fourteen lines about .... Well, I think he gave me suggestions for two; one about the arbitrariness of codes and the fact that they were not the best protection; and the other was the expansion of the city and the hurting of the terrain. I tried those two things. Of course it was proved, as Louis Mumford said it would be, that people will not read verse for better understanding the relation of finance and aesthetics. They just wouldn't do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a great combination though. Now something about Mrs. Wright.

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Mrs. Wright was patient and understanding. Once she called me down after

the episode of the lecture on Josiah Warren, the anarchist, saying that I diverted Wright from things that he ought to be talking about and to get him enthusiastic about the first American anarchist and let him originate talks on the subject when he ought to be talking about other things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you get to know her I mean in the few visits there? Did she come to New York ever?

ARTHUR C. HOLDEN: Oh yes, I've seen her in New York. And I saw her at the Princeton Conference in 1947. and I saw her in Taliesin. And I still hear from her at least at Christmas time every year.

END OF INTERVIEW

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