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ARCHITECTURE

The Quest to Recover a Lost Frank Lloyd Wright Building

Project to restore one of Wright's buildings is providing insight into one of the last century's most celebrated architects

By Vipal Monga

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A baseball diamond in the Canadian town of Banff may be hiding the answer to an architectural mystery.

If a team of professors is right, buried beneath the baseball field on the edge of Canada's Rocky Mountains is the foundation of the Banff National Park Pavilion, one of only two buildings in the country designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

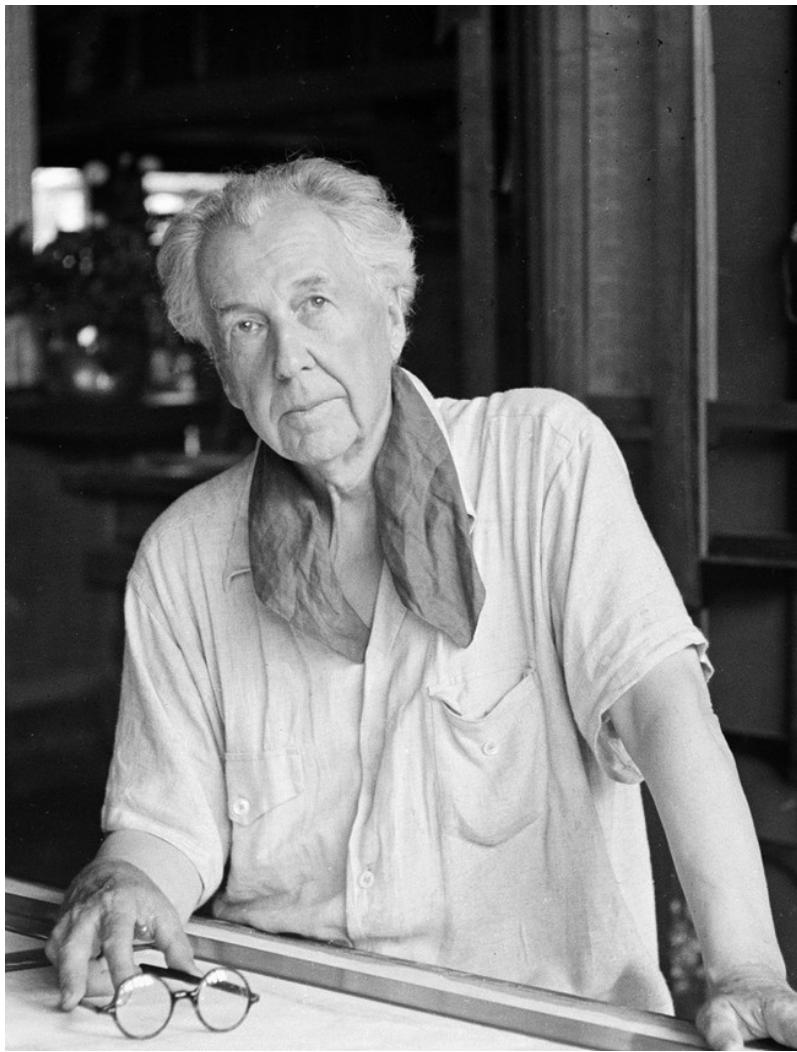
The structure was demolished just before World War II, and nobody today seems to know exactly where it stood. Finding its foundation could be one of the keys to an effort by architects from Toronto's Ryerson University, who are trying to rebuild the pavilion as faithfully to the original as possible.

The trouble is, they aren't sure exactly how Wright designed it in the first place.

"We're following all the breadcrumbs," said Yew-Thong Leong, associate professor of architecture at Ryerson. He is leading seven professors hired by Michael Miner, a filmmaker who has made four feature-length documentaries about Wright, to restore the structure and in the process recover one of Canada's lost architectural gems.

Mr. Leong and the scholars have been asked to create new construction plans for the building and help the town estimate the cost and time required for the rebuild. Mr. Miner hopes to break ground next spring.

Wright designed the Banff Pavilion, intended to be a picnic house and rest station for tourists, in 1911. It came at the tail end of what is known as his "prairie style" era, during which he built long, low-rise buildings that reflected the expanse of his native Midwestern landscape.



A 1938 photo of Frank Lloyd Wright in his studio and home in Spring Green, Wis. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

commission from the Canadian government.

Affording views of the mountain ranges west of Banff, in the province of Alberta, the pavilion was located on a plain next to the Bow River, which runs through the town. Wright didn't account for the river's periodic flooding, and the waters often submerged the building. It succumbed to the elements and was demolished in 1938.

"It's a historical tragedy," said Mr. Miner, who heads the Frank Lloyd Wright Revival Initiative, a nonprofit dedicated to restoring Wright buildings.

Evie Eshpeter, a Calgary-based consultant who is working with Mr. Miner, said the team got the town of Banff interested by pointing out the increased tourism the area could see by restoring the building. Randall McKay, director of planning for the town, was initially among the skeptics.

"The fact is, it's been long erased from the collective memory of the community," he said. But after learning more about the building and its architectural significance, he added, "I've certainly come around to the value of this and the potential it would have."

The man
who
designed
the
Solomon R.
Guggenhei
m Museum
in New York
and
Fallingwater
in
Pennsylvani
a worked
with
architect
Francis
Conroy
Sullivan to
build the
200-foot-
long wood
and stone
building as
part of a

This is the Wright initiative's first project, because according to Mr. Miner, the pavilion is a relatively simple structure, and completing it could build momentum for more ambitious efforts. But once the Ryerson team got the pavilion's original drawings, made on linens stored in Canada's national archives in Ottawa, the scholars found it may not be as easy as they thought.

Lines that appear straight on the linens were crooked when scanned into a computer. Though the building was asymmetrical, only one side of the plans had dimensions noted. The schematics lacked specifics about such critical details as the dimensions of the windows, a kitchen area and supporting pillars.

Some directions were left up to workmen of the day to interpret. Instructions for the roof, for example, simply read "lathe and plaster."

Lacking basic information, the crew has had to deduce Wright's intentions. They've tried to apply mathematical principles he was known to favor, such as the Golden Ratio, which designers use to mirror nature and create pleasing proportions, and harmonic series, where proportions are based on musical frequencies.

To ensure that the workmanship is accurate, the Ryerson researchers turned to 1900s building manuals to relearn some of that era's building techniques.

Another key: The Banff pavilion is similar to Wright's River Forest Tennis Club, an Illinois construction from the same era. Both buildings are long, single-story structures with hipped roofs and wide chimneys.

Though the tennis club is longer than the pavilion, the Ryerson group has tried to apply dimensional theory, based on the proportions of tennis courts, to the Banff project. Team members, aware of Wright's interest in Japanese aesthetics, also tested proportions based on the dimensions of a traditional tatami mat to fill in the gaps in the Banff drawing.

The team has been struggling with mistakes that Wright made, such as the pavilion's flood-prone design. "He may never have been to Banff," said Mr. Leong. "Things got missed."

The architects ran a 100-year analysis of the flooding from the Bow River and discovered that at times the building could be submerged in as much as 3½ feet of water. To deal with the problem, they have considered building automated stilts that would lift the building when the Bow overflows, surrounding it with an inflatable pontoon to keep it afloat, or damming the river to redirect the flow of water.

The project is giving them insight into the thinking of one of the last century's most celebrated architects. "The project takes on this sacredness, because he's such an iconic master," said Kendra Schank Smith, a professor of architectural science at Ryerson.

Step Inside the Banff Pavilion



Banff Pavilion

Banff Pavilion

Rohe, for example, was torn down in 1930 but reconstructed in the 1980s using new marble. It is still considered part of that architect's work.

In the coming weeks, Mr. Leong's team will be renting scanners from the nearby city of Calgary to search for clues to the pavilion foundation's location as they try to pin down exactly how it was oriented.

"It's like 'Raiders of the Lost Ark,' " Mr. Leong said.

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