

A Visit to the Guggenheim Museum Delights Students and Teachers

It was an invitation to architect Frank Lloyd Wright from the art advisor to Solomon R. Guggenheim that put the wheels in motion toward the creation of the Guggenheim Museum, a place to hold the four-year-old Museum of Non-Objective Painting.

What occurred next was basically a struggle, with the architect going up against his clients, city officials, the art world, and public opinion. Both Guggenheim and Wright would die before the building's completion in 1959, but students and teachers looking for a great educationally inspiring student tour have the lasting treasure known as the Guggenheim to visit on their next trip to New York City.

Indeed, the city was the first point of contention with Wright, who made no secret of his disenchantment with Guggenheim's choice of the city for his museum.

"I can think of several more desirable places in the world to build his great museum," Wright wrote in 1949 to Arthur Holden, "but we will have to try New York." Wright thought the city was overbuilt, overpopulated, and lacked architectural merit.

Still, Wright went with his client's wishes, looking at locations on 36th Street, 54th Street, and Park Avenue (all in Manhattan), as well as in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, before settling on the present site on Fifth Avenue between 88th and 89th Streets. Being close to Central Park was key since the park afforded relief from the noise and congestion of the city.

Nature also provided inspiration, embodying Wright's attempts to embed organic forms in architecture. Wright's approach to the building started with how they would visit. He brought people to the top of the building via elevator and had them proceed downward at a leisurely pace on the gentle slope of a continuous ramp, dividing the galleries with self-contained yet interdependent sections. The open rotunda meant viewers could see several bays of work on different levels simultaneously and the spiral design recalled a nautilus shell, with continuous spaces flowing freely one into another.

Even as it embraced nature, the design put Wright's unique stamp on modernist architecture's rigid geometry. A symphony of triangles, ovals, arcs, circles, and squares, with forms echoing one another throughout, the museum uses various shapes to create an overall effect that keeps visitors returning for more.

Wright's vision took decades to be fulfilled. A large rotunda, for example, was to be accompanied by a small rotunda and a tower and a small rotunda (or monitor building, as Wright called it) was intended to house apartments but became offices and miscellaneous storage space. In 1965, the second floor of the building was renovated to display a growing permanent collection, and with the restoration of the museum in 1990–92, it was named the Thannhauser Building in honor of one of the most important bequests to the museum.

Wright's original plan for having artists' studios and apartments in the tower never occurred, mostly due to money.

During the restoration, a 1968 office/art-storage annex was replaced by the current structure. The tower provides four additional exhibition galleries.

Some people, especially artists, criticized Wright for creating a museum environment that might overpower the art inside. "On the contrary," he wrote, "it was to make the building and the painting an uninterrupted, beautiful symphony such as never existed in the World of Art before."

Wright conquered the static regularity of geometric design and combined it with the plasticity of nature, producing a vibrant building whose architecture continues to refresh.

The Guggenheim is arguably Wright's most eloquent presentation and the most important building of his late career.

As a result, a student tour of the Guggenheim should be on any teacher's list.

About the Author

[Travel Adventures](#) is a student tour provider staffed by educators who understand the needs of teachers. It has served over one half million students since 1987 and its mission is to "empower teachers to create change by expanding the classroom to the world."

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