Frank Lloyd Wright's Scandals

While Frank Lloyd Wright's brand of Organic Modernism proved appealing to progressive clients in Cincinnati, Wright himself did not seem so attractive. Only in the last half-decade of his life did he receive commissions in the city. From 1954-59, he designed three residences for Cincinnati: the Boulter, Tonkens, and Boswell Houses. Wright's frequent public scandals from 1909-1927, and their unflattering appearance in national newspapers, including some in the Cincinnati papers, may have cost him potential jobs in the rather conservative city, even among Modernist-oriented clients. Cincinnati commissions came to Wright only in the last few years of his life when his scandals were forgotten and he became indisputably America's most famous architect.

A brief summary of Wright's "newsworthy" scandals:

Cincinnati newspapers are highlighted in red; and other city papers are highlighted in yellow

In 1909, Wright began an adulterous affair with Mamah (Borthwick) Cheney, the wife of Edwin H. Cheney. The Cheneys had been the architect's clients for a house built in 1903 in Oak Park, Illinois, not far from Wright's own home-office. Wright left his wife and children in Oak Park and went to Berlin, where Mrs. Cheney joined him.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT AND MRS. CHENEY TRACED TO EUROPE—ON WAY TO JAPAN.

CHICAGO, Nov. 13.—Frank Lloyd Wright, whose fame as a designer of original conceptions in residence buildings, extends to foreign shores, left his Oak Park residence early in October, ostensibly to publish a portfolio of plans in Berlin. He sailed from New York and was heard from in the German capital.

About the time of his departure Mrs. Edwin H. Cheney, wife of the president of the Wagner Electric Manufacturing company of Chicago, disappeared from the residence of a friend in Colorado, where she had been spending the summer. Efforts to establish the whereabouts of Mrs. Cheney, guided by circumstances which already had linked her name and that of Mr. Wright in Oak Park society gossip, led to the discovery that she had been the companion of the architect for a month in Germany and probably is with him on the way to Japan.

In Berlin Wright had apartments at the Hotel Adlon, where he registered as "Frank Lloyd Wright and wife, Chicago." His business address there was in care of Ernest Wasmuth & Co., architects, No. 35 Markgrafen strasse, where he received mail for himself, and cablegrams and letters to Mrs. Cheney from relatives here have been received there by her. Neither Wright nor Mrs. Cheney, who posed as man and wife, had any explanation to offer when Mrs. Cheney claimed letters and despatches in her own name. Four days ago they gave up their apartments in the Hotel Adlon, leaving no address, but announced they were going to Japan.

That Wright is the victim of a strange infatuation against which he has battled for years is the statement of Mrs. Wright in the seclusion of her Oak Park residence surrounded by her children.

The Spokane Press, November 13, 1909. ProQuest Historical Newspapers

Between 1912 and 1914, while still legally married to his first wife Catherine, Wright moved Mamah Borthwick (by then divorced from Mr. Cheney) into Taliesin, his combined home and office near Spring Green, Wisconsin. They lived together there, unmarried, for three years.

Her Spiritual Hegira Ends in His Divorce

CHENEY DIVORCES WIFE WHO ELOPED

Oak Park Man Given Custody of Children She Deserted to Flee Abroad.

AFFINITY TIRED OF HER.

Frank L. Wright Received by His Spouse After "Spiritual Hegira."

Edwin H. Cheney of Oak Park has secured an absolute divorce from his wife with custody of the children. The decree was entered yesterday by Judge Brentano.

Thus ends a peculiar marital tangle. Mrs. Cheney, it will be remembered, eloped with Frank Lloyd Wright, architect, about two years ago. Wright deserted his wife and babies. Mrs. Cheney left her husband and family. The two departed for Europe on what they called a "spiritual hegira."

Wright, builder of bungalows, tired of the escapade and returned to Chicago. He was taken into the bosom of his family without any stir.

Mr. Cheney's suit was filed July 28 in the Superior court, but he did not name Wright or make any charge except desertion.

Mr. Cheney appeared before Judge Brentano with Eugene G. Fassett, his counsel; Mrs. Armilla A. Cheney, his mother, and Attorney Walter S. Holden, the latter two appearing as witnesses for him.

Mr. Cheney Testifies.

"About June 28, 1909, Mrs. Cheney left me, stating that she was not going to return," testified Mr. Cheney. "She also stated three days prior to that time that she was going away and would not come back.

"Since then she has not returned, neither has she offered to return. While we lived together I conducted myself kindly toward her and showed her every kind attention possible in a husband and supported her to the best of my ability."

"Did you give her any occasion to leave you?" Attorney Fassett asked Mr. Cheney.

"No, no occasion at all."

"And have you at all times had the care, custody, and control of your children."

"Yes, sir. There is an agreement between us that the children are to remain in my custody."

Chicago Daily Tribune, Aug 6, 1911; ProQuest Historical Newspapers

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In 1914, a mentally imbalanced servant set Taliesin afire and attacked its residents with a hatchet. He killed seven people, including a number of Wright's draftsmen and his mistress, Mamah Borthwick and her two children by Mr. Cheney.

THE PENSACOLA JOURNAL, SUNDAY MORNING,

WISCONSIN BUNGALOW MURDER REVEALS STORY OF ARCHITECT AND "SOUL MATE"

Ruins of the Wright Bungalow; Mrs. Mamah Borthwick Cheney, Frank Lloyd Wright and Hatchet Used by Negro in Murders.

Chicago, Aug. 21.—The murder, by a crazed negro in the Wright bungalow at Spring Green, Wisconsin, of Mamah Borthwick Cheney and her two young children has brought to light the interesting romance of Frank Lloyd Wright, world famous Chicago architect and owner of the bungalow, and the murdered woman, who was his "soul mate."

It was in October, 1909, that Edwin H. Cheney, a Chicago lawyer, received a letter from his wife in Boulder, Colo., where she had been visiting friends, asking him to come for their two children. When he arrived in Boulder Mrs. Cheney already had left.

At about the same time Frank Lloyd Wright had left for Berlin with the intention of having some books on architectural subjects published. It is believed that the two met in New York and took the same steamer across the Atlantic. At least they traveled as "soul mates" while in Germany.

Mrs. Wright had been left to care for her six children in the Oak Park bungalow which her husband had designed. She sent her eldest son, Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr., to Germany to induce her husband to return to her. The son's mission failed and he returned to his work in the office of a New York architectural publishing firm.

Later the son made another trip abroad with no better results. In September, 1910, word was received by Mrs. Wright that her husband was coming back. Shortly afterward Mr. Wright and Mrs. Cheney arrived in New York. While there the architect visited the publishing firm by which his son was employed and Mrs. Cheney accompanied him. The son saw his father, but did not greet him at once. He waited until Mrs. Cheney had walked out into the corridor.

The boy then struck Mr. Wright, knocked him down, and blackened both eyes.

Mr. Wright returned to Chicago the following month and went back to live with his family. But shortly before Christmas of the same year the friends of the two families were startled to learn that Mr. Wright had slipped away on a second hegira. The bungalow at Spring Green, Wis., which was the scene of the murder a few days ago, was nearing completion, and Wright and Mrs. Cheney, who in the meantime had secured a divorce, had established themselves there comfortably.

Things went along smoothly enough until it was reported that they had quarreled over the family bill of fare. Mrs. Cheney, or Mrs. Borthwick as she preferred to be called after securing her divorce, insisted on having pork chops and Mr. Wright held that pork chops were an insult to his esthetic tastes.

Mr. Wright of late has visited his wife in Oak Park. He resided in the same house with her for some time, Mrs. Borthwick remained in the "love bungalow", and Mr. Wright made frequent visits, dividing his time between Chicago, where his work demanded his presence, and Spring Green.

The Pensacola Journal, August 21, 1914; ProQuest Historical Newspapers

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In 1914-15, while still legally married to his first wife Catherine, Wright began an affair with Maud Miriam Noel and moved her into the rebuilt Taliesin.

FRANK WRIGHT IS UNCONVENTIONAL, BUT MRS. NOEL LOVES HIM JUST THE SAME

Mrs. Maud Miriam Noel.

The Grand Forks Daily Herald, November 12, 1915; ProQuest Historical Newspapers

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In 1922, Wright finally divorced his first wife, Catherine. He married Miriam Noel in 1923.

In 1925, while still legally married to his second wife, Miriam, Wright began living with Olgivanna (Lazovich) Hinzenberg, with whom he had an illegitimate child, Iovanna.

In 1926, Wright's second wife, Miriam, brought legal action against him. This forced the architect and his mistress Olgivanna into hiding. Simultaneously, Olgivanna's former husband, Valdemar Hinzenberg, pursued the couple in order to gain legal custody of his and Olgivanna's daughter, Svetlana, who had stayed with her mother. Wright was accused by the authorities of violating the Mann Act [a U.S. Federal law passed in 1910 that made it a felony to transport any woman or girl for prostitution, debauchery, or other "immoral" purposes—though the law's intent was not to criminalize consenting sexual behavior between adults]. Wright and Olgivanna were arrested in Minnesota, though the charges were later dropped. Also in 1926, Wright's bank attempted to foreclose upon Taliesin, which was mortgaged. In the face of all this, Wright and Olgivanna departed for California together.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 1926.

Wright Divorce Trial Set.

BARABOO, Wis., Jan. 16 (AP).—The divorce suit of Frank Lloyd Wright, internationally known architect, and Miriam Noel Wright, sculptress, has been set for trial Jan. 25, before Circuit Judge A. C. Hopmann. Mrs. Wright is expected to ask for a continuance on the ground that she is unprepared for trial.

The New York Times, July 17, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers

In 1927, Wright's second wife, Miriam, pursued him and Olgivanna to California and attempted to have them arrested. In the same year, another fire at Taliesin destroyed much valuable art. Also, a part of Wright's art collection was auctioned to pay his debts. In 1927, Wright's wife Miriam finally granted him a divorce, which allowed he and Olgivanna to marry. This occurred in 1928. After this, Wright's life at Taliesin settled down and he and Olgivanna began taking live-in architectural pupils and apprentices. Olgivanna helped Wright to reorganize his life and contributed to his highly productive architectural practice.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, JULY 18, 1928.

TO TRY WRIGHT AND DANCER

San Diego Court Will Hear Architect on Wife's Charges.

SAN DIEGO, Cal., July 17 (AP).—Frank Lloyd Wright, architect, and Mme. Olga Milanoff, Montenegrin dancer, will obtain a preliminary hearing here Aug. 30 on charges of being lewd and dissolute persons.

Wright and his companion, through their attorney, entered pleas of not guilty. The attorney declined to reveal their wheerabouts.

The charges were preferred by Mrs. Miriam Noel Wright, divorced wife of the architect. An interlocutory decree now separates the Wrights, but it has not become final. Mrs. Wright requested issuance of the warrants after she had been arrested for destroying some of the expensive furnishings in the architect's suburban home.

The New York Times, July 12, 1928; ProQuest Historical Newspapers

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JULY 15, 1928.

ARREST MRS. WRIGHT FOR RAID ON HUSBAND

Jail Sentence Suspended After She Had Smashed Rival's Furniture at San Diego.

SAN DIEGO, Cal., July 14 (AP).—Mrs. Miriam Noel Wright, English sculptress and authoress, was sentenced today in City Justice Court to serve thirty days in jail, after she pleaded guilty to a charge of malicious mischief.

The action was the result of her visit yesterday to the La Jolla home of her husband, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect, when she destroyed house furnishings valued at $1,000.

Sentence was suspended on condition that she reimburse the agent for the owner of the property for the damage done.

Following the court action, Mrs. Wright swore out complaints against her husband and Olga Hinzenberg, also named as Olga Milanoff, Montenegrin dancer, charging them with being "lewd and dissolute persons."

Bail for each was fixed at $150, to become effective if the warrants are served.

The marital troubles of Wright and his wife have extended through Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota to California.

The New York Times, July 15, 1928; ProQuest Historical Newspapers

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