

## Reviving Wright in Cincinnati

By the last half-decade of his life, Frank Lloyd Wright had achieved fame enough to overcome his numerous scandals and to appeal directly to Cincinnati clients. Between 1954-59, he received commissions for three Cincinnati houses. ([Boulter House](#), [Tonkens House](#), [Boswell House](#)) In fact, by the time Wright died in 1959, Cincinnati clients wanted more. A kind of nostalgic, "Wright Revival" ensued. One of its most prominent buildings was the University of Cincinnati Faculty Center. Completed in 1969, a decade after Wright's death, the building's patron was Cincinnati political leader Murray Seasongood. Seasongood, of Jewish descent, helped found the city's progressive Charter Party, served as mayor from 1926-30, and became a great promoter of Cincinnati and Hamilton County parks. An avowed admirer of Wright, Seasongood provided funding for the UC Faculty Center and stipulated that it be in a Wrightian style. The firm of Cellarius and Hilmer designed the building. Charles Cellarius, the older partner, specialized in Colonial Revival buildings and seems to have turned the Faculty Center designs over to his younger partner, Herbert F. Hilmer.

The 1969 Faculty Center was a conscious revival of Wright's early-20th-century Prairie Style buildings. Like many Wright Prairie Style houses, the Faculty Center had a cruciform plan and an horizontal composition with shallow, hipped roofs creating deep overhangs. It utilized natural materials such as wood, brick, and stone. In 1988, almost 20 years after the Faculty Center's construction, the architectural firm of Glaser, Myers and Associates added the Myers Alumni Center to it, utilizing the same, early Wrightian style. The Alumni Center consisted of an eastern wing that joined the earlier Faculty Center on the north, forming a U-shaped plan with a handsome, landscaped courtyard between the two connected buildings. After the University's embrace of high-rise towers for its offices, classrooms, and dormitories in the 1970s, the horizontal, nature-oriented composition of the Faculty and Alumni Center seemed increasingly stranded on campus—although its low-rise composition, its courtyard, and its surrounding landscape created an open, park-like area on campus. The University of Cincinnati demolished this finely constructed complex in 2017, thus obliterating an interesting part of the [Frank Lloyd Wright and Cincinnati](#) story.



Left: University of Cincinnati Faculty Center by Cellarius & Hilmer, 1968 - 69. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer, 2016.



Right: University of Cincinnati Myers Alumni Center by Glaser, Myers & Associates, 1988. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer, 2016.



Demolition of University of Cincinnati Faculty - Alumni Center (view from south). 2016. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer, 2016.



Demolition of University of Cincinnati Faculty - Alumni Center (view from north). 2016. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer, 2016.



Demolition video of University of Cincinnati Faculty - Alumni Center (view from north). 2016. Video by Elizabeth Meyer, 2016.

Since Wright's death, particularly from the 1970s onward, increasing numbers of books about him, both scholarly and visual, along with restorations of many of his buildings, has fueled a nation-wide "Wright Revival." This includes a virtual industry of reproducing his designs, not only for things like furniture and windows, but for trinkets such as coasters, scarves, and neckties—a popular phenomenon without precedent in the history of American architecture. As the popularity of Wright's designs increased, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, in cooperation with Taliesin, Wright's school and successor firm, began a "Legacy Program" to sell unbuilt Wright designs to present-day clients who want to live in a "Wright house."

The Bernos, an Ohio couple who greatly admired Wright's work, first chose his pupil [Benjamin Dombar](#) in 1994 to design for them a Wrightian-style house in Morrow, Ohio. Then, in the year 2000, they purchased a steep lot in the Cincinnati suburb of Clifton. By that time, Ben Dombar had retired and the Bernos approached the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation for plans, from which they constructed a faithful version of an unbuilt house that Wright had designed in 1939 for clients in Michigan. An irony of this recent and well-crafted Cincinnati "Wright" house is that, in 1939, when Wright originally designed it, no Cincinnati clients would have hired him due to his scandalous reputation. [see [Frank Lloyd Wright's Scandals](#)]



Berno House, Clifton, Cincinnati, Ohio (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1939 for clients in Michigan; unbuilt). Adapted for the Bernos' site and built in 2000, supervised by William E. Mim, Taliesin Architects. Image retrieved from Google Maps, 2018.

[ADD PHOTOGRAPH OF BERNO HOUSE](#)

A final irony is that, while Wright's designs are now being reproduced from the scale of tourist trinkets to entire houses, few Cincinnatians show much awareness or concern for the many, fine Wrightian-style buildings that exist in their city. The University of Cincinnati's recent demolition of its handsome, Wrightian Faculty and Alumni Center should awaken Cincinnati to the importance of Wright's influence on the city and to the many local buildings by Wright's pupils and followers that form an integral and important part of Cincinnati's landscapes.

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