

Movies

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION: FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S BUILDINGS AND LEGACY IN JAPAN

DIRECTED BY KAREN SEVERNS AND KOICHI MORI

WRITTEN BY SEVERNS

NARRATED BY AZBY BROWN AND DONALD RICHIE

Wright in Japan

How they influenced him—and he them.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

Frank Lloyd Wright readily acknowledged the influence of Japanese art—particularly the abstract shapes, lively colors, and unusual perspectives of wood-block prints—on his work. He softened or denied the influence of Japanese architecture—but then he was always reluctant to admit any direct architectural influences. Both predilections are examined in *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan*, a 2004 documentary Chicago native Karen Severns made with her Japanese husband, Koichi Mori. The film also shows that Wright had a profound influence on Japanese architecture. "At one point," Severns says in her narration, read by Azby Brown, "there were 32 Wright-related terms in the [Japanese] architectural lexicon."

The story of the two-way cultural traffic between Wright and Japan is so intricate that even a 128-minute film can barely scratch the surface. And the surface that's scratched is mainly in Japan, not here. Wright's visits to Japan spanned 17 years, starting with his very first trip abroad—in 1905, when he was 37—and culminating with his work on Tokyo's awesome Imperial Hotel. They weren't exactly casual visits. In 1905 he brought back to the States enough prints, textiles, and ceramics to curate a show at the Art Institute the following year—starting a sideline in Japanese art that would become a major source of income over the next two decades—and in 1916 he sailed back to Japan with a grand piano and a yellow convertible.

The closest thing to a summa-



Wright (in pith helmet and seated, far left) at the Imperial Hotel in 1922; behind him in white is Arata Endo.

tion in the film comes at the beginning: "Without Japan, there may have been no second golden age for Frank Lloyd Wright. Without Frank Lloyd Wright, Japan may

have forsaken its ancient craft traditions and sacrificed its proud architectural past in the pursuit of modernization." The epic tale of the Imperial's construction takes

center stage in this story. The huge hotel consolidated Wright's international reputation, not only because its innovative floating mud foundation enabled it to survive

a 1922 earthquake that left 70 percent of Tokyo in rubble and three and a half million people homeless, but because its scale makes it sound like a contemporary equivalent to the Pyramids. Wright had 100 stonecutters at his disposal for incidental decor, he designed everything, even the china used in the restaurant, and as he pushed to

finish the project he commanded a workforce of 1,000. It was the first all-electric hotel in Asia, and it contained Japan's first shopping arcade and first hotel laundry service. Photos of this now lost masterwork, each one shifting from black and white to color, are the film's aesthetic high point.

Part of the lesser-known story told here concerns Arata Endo, who started as Wright's major

assistant on the Imperial when he was only 27. Sometimes referred to by Wright as his "samurai," he was the only person Wright would ever allow to share architectural credit with him. The documentary cites two times this happened—the progressive School of the Free Spirit for girls in Tokyo and a summer villa in Ashiya—and it includes the architects' joint declaration about the school. (The film often uses Wright's own words, which are read here and elsewhere by the premier American interpreter of Japanese culture, especially film, Donald Richie.) We also learn about Czech-born Antonin Raymond, a Wright apprentice who traveled to Japan to help Wright and remained there for 43 years, becoming a leading figure in Japanese modernism.

Since the documentary understandably privileges the Imperial, viewers might conclude that Wright's greatest accomplishments in the U.S. were also the urban blockbusters. But Wright hated cities, and many of his most

famous urban designs, including parts of the Imperial, reflect that animosity: one of his late proposals for housing in New York City was to surround two mile-high buildings with acres of greenery. Even the uncharacteristically urban Guggenheim can be seen as a reproach to skyscrapers, though it's not precisely the building he designed. It also reflects his dislike of paintings. But it's a blockbuster, which may be why the film calls it the "world's most remarkable museum" and doesn't feel obliged to say why.

I saw the Japanese influence—and Wright's hostility to the urban—in the Wright house where I had the privilege to grow up, recently restored and opened as a public museum. Designed for my parents and built in Florence, Alabama, in 1940, it had a heated floor that followed the dips and rises of the terrain, it embraced the backyard while turning its back on the street, and its economical, horizontal spaces gave one a sense of cozy continuity. Almost everything in the house looked and felt Japanese, from



The house Wright designed for the Rosenbaums in Florence, Alabama

the sweep of the front wall to the patio that was part of the wing Wright added in 1948 (which my mother later converted into a Japanese garden).

Severns and Mori's chronology of the cultural exchange between Wright and Japan is a worthy endeavor, but I wish they'd explored some of the other effects of Wright's love of Japan on his American identi-

ty—and not only as an architect. My parents often recalled the controversial newsletters defending Japan he sent from Taliesin during World War II, and his arguments would have made a fascinating addition. Still, in telling the Japanese side of the story, Severns and Mori have clarified an important, little-known phase in the architect's work. □