

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

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### Martin, Wright exchanged many letters

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The Darwin Martin House evolved from a rough sketch included in a two-page, typewritten letter from Frank Lloyd Wright to Darwin Martin in May 1903 - one of hundreds of items in the University at Buffalo archives that offer extraordinary insight into the often prickly relationship between the men.

Wright pointed out that the corner lot Martin had secured for his residential complex at Jewett Parkway and Summit Avenue was not square. The parcel met the intersection at a pinched angle southeast of the George Barton House, which was already being built.

Would Martin object, Wright asked, "to squaring your building with the Barton's. Disregarding the Jewett Avenue frontage as far as a parallel is concerned. (?)"

Though neighboring homes were parallel to the curb, "I think it is important that the Barton House and your own stand square with regard to each other, leaving square angles in the court between, barn and all," he wrote.

When Martin, who had fumed over the high cost of the Barton House, saw Wright's 5,400-square-foot preliminary plan for the Martin House in late 1903, he demanded downsizing.

"The house we live in covers 1100 sq. ft.," he wrote to Wright. "You remember the Swede who missed the ferry boat by 20 ft. He said he could have made it in 'two yumps.' From 1100 to 5400 ft. is too much for one yump. You will have to build us an intermediate house of say 3000 sq. ft."

As usual Wright held his ground, telling Martin: ". . . if we are going to realize the home you are entitled to and ought to have you will have to 'ring off' on the square foot business and comparisons with anything in previous existence."

As the grand plan was fine-tuned, the architect was peppered with letters expressing alarm over the project's soaring cost.

"We may be able to put up the buildings for \$14,000, but I do not know how to get out of it now," the client fretted in May 1904 regarding the garage-stable and conservatory.

Martin thus "set the tone of reckless abandon that would characterize his financial dealings with Wright throughout the project and for many years thereafter," Jack Quinan, a University at Buffalo art history professor, observed in his 2004 book, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House: Architecture as Portraiture."

As construction of the complex was about to begin in August 1904, Martin quizzed Wright on the item-by-item details, and Wright replied by subtly attempting to double the budget.

"You ought to spend \$75,000 on it instead of \$40,000 just to leave Buffalo something worth having, something to live up to, you know," he wrote.

Martin fired back: "Have you any idea by this time how exceedingly aggravating it is to a client to have to tease and coax and wheedle for past due details? For details that obviously require only concentrated industry, not courting of the Muse, to produce. You do not have to court a Muse to produce detail for our stable door. We want to hang the doors soon and we don't want to wait much longer for brains. ..."

Although the project's cost was millions in today's dollars, Wright continually cried poor - and never hesitated to pester his leading patron for more. During a May 1906 visit to Buffalo, he asked for \$1,200.

"My conscience does not . . . smite me a mite," Martin wrote 12 days later, "in saying that if One Thousand Dollars spot cash will bring from you a receipt in full of all demands including the future things that may be considered necessary accessories to the buildings already built and planned, I will scare up the money and send it to you."

Wright, confident of his ability to sway Martin, replied: "You are incorrigible, - but I love you just the same. Send the money."

- Tom Buckham