

## **Pedro Guerrero and Friend (Frank Lloyd Wright) and their 1958 Visit to the Glass House**

by Gwen North Reiss

There aren't many people who have spent an afternoon at the Glass House with Frank Lloyd Wright and Philip Johnson. Pedro E. Guerrero, Wright's photographer for 20 years, was one, and in June he visited the Glass House to tell us his story for our Oral History Project.

Guerrero was hired by Wright when he was a young photographer just out of school. Wright became a father figure to him and relied on Guerrero's photos to give him essential information on his buildings. Guerrero understood instinctively as

a young photographer that the only way to photograph any building, especially a Wright building, was to approach it as sculpture.

Guerrero worked for Wright both at the Wisconsin Taliesin and Taliesin West. A few years after the architect's death, Guerrero became photographer to Alexander Calder and later Louise Nevelson. He lived in New Canaan, Connecticut, for 50 years, photographing many of New Canaan's modern houses while on assignment for magazine editors in New York.

Guerrero also recalled for us a conversation with Wright in which the architect declined a helicopter ride to help take aerial photos. "Oh, come on," said Guerrero to Wright "the worst that can happen is that the copter will crash. I can see the headlines now: 'P.E. Guerrero and Friend Killed in Copter Crash.'" Wright waved him off with a twinkle in his eye. It was the last time Guerrero



Frank Lloyd Wright and Pedro Guerrero in 1949 in Pleasantville, New York

saw him.

With his hat and cane and silk scarf, Guerrero is an elegant presence, not unlike his old boss. His visit to the Glass House with his wife, author Dixie Legler, and his daughter Susan and son Ben, was a pleasure for all of us. He sat on the Mies daybed for the interview, and when his daughter asked him if he'd be okay on a backless chair, he replied. "Oh, I can always lie down, darling." Here is his story about Wright and Johnson, as he told it this June. The visit took place in 1958, about a year before Wright's death.

Guerrero remembers the phone call from Frank Lloyd Wright. "I was mowing the grass," he said.

"There were fifty years between us and he remembered that I lived in New Canaan. He said 'Why don't you come over and have lunch with the Raywards. The Rayward house [Wright's only house in New Canaan], he had just finished and he had come to see it for the first time. We were walking around the grounds, and Mr. Wright said 'Let's go see Philip.' Mr. Wright called, and Philip said he was delighted to have us. So we went on a spring day in 1958 about a year before Mr. Wright died and we came up a walk to the house that was white pebbles at the time—very brilliant. I described the house as not only a window but a mirror as well.

"Philip came to the door and said 'Mr. Wright, welcome to the monkey house.' And Mr. Wright said 'Why do you call it that?' And Philip said 'it's because you said I had designed a monkey house.' Mr. Wright said 'No, Philip, I said that you were capable of doing it, not that you had.'

"So anyway, he wanted to know if he [Johnson] knew all the people who were there. He knew the Raywards. Philip and I had met 20 years before. I don't think he remembered me and I don't blame him for that but I do remember him. Philip was at Taliesin in Wisconsin getting ready to put on a show at the Museum of Modern Art of Frank Lloyd Wright's work and I was doing all the photography on that.

"He let us in and it turned out to be a sort of a cocktail party. There was a table over here that had scotch and ice and glasses. And over there where that sink is was a drawing board that Philip had, and there was a big pad and a crayon on it and Mr. Wright and Alfred Barr and Philip exchanged a lot of barbs. There was a love-hate relationship between Philip and Mr. Wright, but it was mostly a love relationship because I remember Philip saying 'Frank Lloyd Wright is a genius and I hate him for it.'

"The afternoon turned out to be a lecture on the part of Mr. Wright with jibes from Alfred Barr and from Philip. Mr. Wright was giving a history of architecture starting with the cave people, and he kept moving forward with the different techniques from bamboo that had been gathered together—and they had vine leaves on the bottom which eventually became the pillars of Grecian and Roman architecture—and he went on like that for some time. He'd run out of scotch and he came over here to get some scotch and he noticed that Elie Nadelman's statue was right in the center where that camera is now and Mr. Wright went and moved it over to where it is now. He went back to drawing and he talked. Mr. Wright went on sketching and sketching and he came over and got some more scotch. Meantime Philip had moved the statue back to center and Mr. Wright didn't notice that until the third time he got up to get some scotch

“So it’s really getting to be a wonderful afternoon. But when Mr. Wright had finished drawing and talking about how little modern architecture had advanced.... Now, Philip had just finished the Seagram Building [which Wright’s sketches now resembled]. He and Mies van der Rohe had collaborated. Mr. Wright was busy building his circular Guggenheim Museum, so they were both competing for attention in New York City, but Philip was through with the Seagram Building first.

“Mr. Wright saw that Philip had put the statue back and as he was going over with his last scotch, Mr. Wright just blew up. He said ‘Philip, leave perfect symmetry to God!’

And where it [the Nadelman] is now is where Mr. Wright put it. And he showed what he had done [on the sketch pad] and it was a complete rendition of the Seagram Building, which was his way of getting even with Philip.”



Pedro Guerrero's 2010 interview at the Glass House