



A decorating dilemma at Guggenheim Museum

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(0) [Feeds](#) [PopMatters](#) [PopWire](#) **NEW YORK** - A woman walking her two dogs along Fifth Avenue recently stared up at the Guggenheim Museum and contemplated the paint swatches hanging from the northeast side of the building, high above the street.

The first, a buff yellow, represents the original exterior color chosen by the museum's architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. The second is a sample of the off-white shade that, with slight variations, has been the museum's public face for years.

"The yellow one ... it looks too urine-y," she said, shaking her head. "I think Frank Lloyd Wright probably would have decided to change it to the lighter color eventually anyway."

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is getting a new coat of paint, but this is no ordinary decorating dilemma.

Not when the appearance of one of America's most distinctive structures and the legacy of one of its most esteemed architects is at stake.

The city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, which must approve changes to the museum's exterior, may settle the question as early as this week.

Warm yellowish beige or cool, grayish white? Or, in the words of Benjamin Moore: Powell Buff or London Fog?

But a more complicated set of concerns emerged at a commission hearing last month, with sentiment split between historic preservation groups that favor restoring the building to its original color and neighborhood organizations that support the museum's proposal to keep the building an off-white shade the public is familiar with.

Wright, the historical groups point out, was notoriously picky and disliked white so much that he tried (unsuccessfully) to prevent the museum from painting the interior walls that color.

"This is the most visible work of the greatest American architect," said Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council. "Maybe we should treat it with some more respect."

But museum officials and neighborhood groups argue that the building was buff yellow for only its first five years, and that after four additions, the museum is more than the iconic circular structure designed by Wright.

"I've talked to lots and lots of people and I have yet to find somebody who remembers this building buff yellow," said Pamela Jerome, director of Wanks Adams Slavin Associates, the project's preservation architect. "This is not black and white. It's an extremely complex question, as stupid as that sounds for mere paint."

Still, in some ways, it's a lot like any other paint job - with a few twists.

The museum had to strip the facade, although in this case, that meant removing 11 layers of paint and performing scientific analyses on each one, using electron microscopy and infrared spectroscopy.

Officials reviewed paint chips - but these chips are nearly 50 years old and bear Wright's initials on the shade he liked best.

The landmarks commissioners have visited the museum at different times of the day to compare the swatches on the museum's exterior, except that these swatches are actually plywood panels that only can be seen from the Central Park side of Fifth Avenue and 89th Street.

The paint job is part of a \$27 million museum refurbishment begun in 2005. The city has authority over such projects since the building was designated a landmark in 1990.

There have been four additions to the museum since it first opened in 1959, the most significant of which was a large tower built in 1992.

Throughout the years, the iconic circular structure designed by Wright also has undergone many paint jobs, slowly evolving from its original color to the off-white shade proposed by the museum today. That color matches the shade the building was painted in 1992.

Their proposal, museum officials say, adheres to a philosophy called "progressive authenticity," which suggests that a structure's historical significance evolves over time.

"What we're saying is we don't have a pristine Frank Lloyd Wright building," Jerome told the commissioners last month. "Do we go back to the original or do we acknowledge the building is a living organism that has been subjected to many changes and alterations?"

At first, no one was quite sure what the original color had been until the paint was stripped from the building. And even now, there is some debate about what Wright's intentions really were.

One local historian insists he has seen an early Wright rendering that showed the museum covered in ivy. A recent article in an academic journal contends that in his very earliest drawings of the museum, circa 1943, Wright conceived of an exterior covered in bright red or orange marble, with verdigris copper banding on the top and bottom.

In March 1958, Wright initialed a paint chip identified as "PV-020", from a new type of paint called "Cocoon" that was considered state-of-art for durability at the time, according to documents in the museum's archives. A few months later, a letter from the museum's clerk of works to the painting contractor indicates that Wright chose the "middle sample" of three that had been applied to a wall of the museum's exterior.

The museum was originally painted the color of that middle sample. But the middle sample and the paint chip Wright signed - while very close in color - do not match exactly, according to scientific analysis.

Complicating matters more, Wright did not live to see the museum completed and opened. He died in April 1959. The museum opened that October.

"I'm torn between giving preference to the current custodians of the building ... and giving preference to Frank Lloyd Wright," Landmarks Commission Chairman Robert Tierney said at the hearing, "given we know with certainty what his preference was."

"Frank Lloyd Wright never really saw the original color because he died before it was finished," said Lo van der Valk, president of Carnegie Hill Neighbors, a community group that supports the museum's plan. "We think the museum researched this very thoroughly."

Seri Worden, chairwoman of Friends of the Upper East Side Historic District, thinks New Yorkers should see the museum how Wright envisioned it.

"Let's go back to the real first edition," she said. "If the people of New York don't know what color Frank Lloyd Wright made this building, I think they should know. What other choice is there?"