

Opus 437

by Dale Kutzera
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On April 15th, 1940, radio personality and film producer John Nesbitt wrote to Frank Lloyd Wright about his recent purchase of the Ennis house in the Hollywood Hills and asked for the architect's help in its restoration. It was the first correspondence in an architect-client relationship that would descend from mutual admiration to bitter acrimony, and produce what may be the finest and most complete un-built design in Wright's career.

The Nesbitt home, designed through the latter part of 1940 and most of 1941, would have occupied a five-acre site on the central California coast near the town of Carmel and the fabled Pebble Beach golf course. With four hundred feet of boulder-strewn coastline and a weathered stand of ancient cypress trees, it is easily one of the most dramatic sites Wright ever designed for, equaling the commanding hillside of Taliesen, and the forest stream Fallingwater. The rise and fall of the project, which Wright referred to as Opus 437 (it being the 437th project he designed), is instructive in the relationship between client and architect, the development of a complete design, and the unfortunate interference of world events in that most basic human desire of building a home.

John Nesbitt, by all accounts, was a perfect client for Frank Lloyd Wright. He possessed a love of land and nature, an affection for Wright's designs, and the kind of creatively adventurous spirit that inspired many clients to seek Wright out. Born in 1910 in British Columbia, he worked a variety of jobs through his teenage years and eventually attended St. Mary's College. A descendent of the actor Edwin Booth (John Wilkes Booth

was a distant relation), he pursued an acting career until the Great Depression intervened. Through those difficult times, he worked as a newspaperman before embarking on a long career in radio, first in Spokane Washington and later in San Francisco.

It was in San Francisco in 1937 that Nesbitt came up with the idea for “The Passing Parade,” a twice-weekly radio series that explored the strange and mundane facets of everyday life. The series aired nationwide and it wasn’t long before Hollywood called in the form of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. In 1938, Nesbitt produced the first “Passing Parade” theatrical short, with stories on what happens to dormant bank accounts, and a depiction of the life of a car from assembly-line to scrap heap.

Nesbitt and wife Bernice initially lived in a Colonial-style home in Hollywood. The classical motif was quite popular in the Hollywood community at the time and it is, therefore, easy to imagine the “emotional upheaval” Nesbitt experienced when he first saw the castle-like Ennis House on Glendower Boulevard in the hills near Griffith Park. It must have been similar to that of seeing Wright’s 1921 Hollyhock House for Aline Barnsdall on nearby Olive Hill, which he later described to Wright:

“Yesterday I walked up the hill from Vermont Avenue to visit Aline Barnsdall’s house, and, coming on it at its most gentle exposure (across the widely sloped lawn) I again had to experience the physical sensation that your grander houses give me. Frankly, my stomach turns over. It is incredible to me that looking at a house should produce more excitement in the imagination than do certain great chords of music or moments of great acting on the stage or even the discovery of a superb line of verse. I take away a sense of astonishment that lasts for many hours.

“I suppose the reason that your houses produce such overwhelming feeling,” he wrote, “is that, as art-works, they burst upon the consciousness not section by section, but entire. The time dimension is absent. It takes three hours for me to view Othello. I am first made happy by the theatrical grandeur of the

speech to the “most grave and reverend signors” and only as this sensation has faded away do I come face to face with the handkerchief scene: and by the time the terror of the scene where Desdemona is strangled comes upon me, I have forgotten my sensations of the first act. But Aline Barnsdall’s house erupts itself upon me in a single phrase.”

Nesbitt had a limited awareness of Wright’s work, but what he saw in magazines, and in the Ennis House, he liked. Built in 1923, the Ennis house was the last of four houses Wright designed using a revolutionary system of concrete blocks interlaced with steel rebar and poured concrete. Sprawling over three lots on a ridge and resting atop an imposing 60-foot-high retaining wall, the flat roofs and battered walls of the Ennis house resemble an abstracted, asymmetrical Mayan temple. The original owners, Charles and Mabel Ennis, parted company with Wright before the home was completed. As a result, many interior details--including wrought-iron grillwork and marble flooring--were not executed to Wright’s specifications. Not only did Nesbitt buy the property, but eagerly resolved to restore it to Wright’s original design. In response to Nesbitt’s request for assistance, Wright wrote, “much will have to be undone” due to the ignorance of the previous clients whom he called “ignorant fools.” It was a moniker Wright would eventually use on Nesbitt himself.

In addition to empathy for Wright’s work, and a love of beautiful things, Nesbitt possessed that other essential quality of an ideal Wright client: money. Nesbitt’s earlier radio salary of \$150 a week was comfortable for it’s day, but now he was earning \$30,000 a year at MGM and an equal sum from freelance radio work. Like many in the movie business, Nesbitt felt he was enduring a career motivated not by genuine creative passion, but by monetary gain, and looked forward to a time when he could leave the movie business and Los Angeles behind. “I have labored very hard in the land of Philistia,” he would later write, “and this sea-house will be the first good thing I have wrung from a dismal profession.”

He paid \$18,000 for the three-acre site on Cypress Point, and proposed a house budgeted at twenty to forty thousand dollars, including landscaping. Nesbitt's plan was to renovate the Ennis house and sell it at a profit, thus financing the Carmel house without resorting to a bank loan. "I have no particular regard for your high personal fame," he wrote, "but a real sympathy with many of the pictures I have seen of your houses. In nearly every one I have the sense that I could move about grandly, shout out lines from my books of verse, bellow my occasional rage and frustration. I want a dwelling place that will house my ego."

And quite a dwelling it would be. Although Nesbitt and his wife had no children at the time, he requested a home with six bedrooms (two for servants), a "great hall" to include areas for writing, a library, a music area with grand piano and built-in phonograph, and a "lavish" kitchen for entertaining. Among his more creative requests was for a large sea-water pool with underwater portholes that would offer a view of aquatic life from the billiard room. In perfect alignment with Wright's own design philosophy, Nesbitt suggested smaller bedrooms, allocating more space and resources on the public spaces. As he wrote in capitalized letters on October 11, 1940 "SLEEPING ROOMS ARE BORING to me. If my fondness for luxury has lead to the request for too much costliness in sleeping space, I would sacrifice them first in order to have a splendid spacious central hall unskimped. I sometimes think a Monk's Cell in a thick wall would be the best for night affairs."

Nesbitt's fascination with the project bordered on obsession. He not only had a topographical map drawn, but a six-foot plaster model of the site crated up and shipped to Wright. He sent detailed lists of the local weather conditions, native materials, and his preferred architectural style. He loved the pictures he had seen of Taliesen, for example, but considered the Arch Obler project in the hills above Malibu "exciting as if it were blown up there in a storm, and, for my taste, still looking pretty stormy. For me--I like a house that will sleep quietly on it's slope and let a man be lazy."

Wright replied, "Our own comes to us and yours, not Opler's, will come to you." The topographical model arrived at Taliesin in September of 1940 and Wright and his apprentices set to work on a design. "I shall regard it as another one of the crowning but tardy rewards of a long 'career,'" Wright wrote, "to see you set up there in an environment that will not only enrich that ego of yours, to which you so splendidly refer--but confer upon what remains of your lifetime the peace and comfort of architecture as I understand it, and I am learning to understand it."

Through the latter half of 1940, Nesbitt had set about refurbishing the Ennis House under the direction of Wright's son, Lloyd--the innovator of the concrete block system and construction supervisor of the house seventeen years earlier--and a Wright apprentice by the name of John Lautner. The marble window sills and ornate lighting fixtures were removed, faulty plumbing replaced, cloth draperies installed, and new furnishings--designed by Nesbitt himself--arranged. The new owner soon discovered, as did any occupant of a textile block house, that decorating presented numerous challenges. Not only did conventional furniture seem out of scale against the pattern block walls, but it was nearly impossible to hang pictures. "Your peculiar imperiousness of design," Nesbitt wrote to Wright, "mocks my every attempt at decoration."

Nesbitt had a controlling nature and waited impatiently for the designs of the Carmel structure. "Since I sent that clay model to you," he wrote. "I have been inevitably considering the project and may be developing pre-conceptions which will make trouble when I see your concept." Among his pre-conceptions was the placement of the house at the back of the property to prevent a lengthy driveway, and a pergola from the "car-shed" to the home that would serve both as wind-break and shield from spying tourists.

Wright's work proceeded according to a long established pattern, beginning with a set of rough floor plans and colored-pencil presentation drawings. The design was a remarkably exacting response to both the site and the client's detailed wishes. Rather than set the buildings back against the road-side edge of the property, however, he pushed

it out toward the coastal bluff. The entire site was rimmed with a covered pergola that would meet Nesbitt's desire for a covered path from car-shed to home and block the view of any nosy tourists.

The main house was an L-shaped structure, with each wing extending from a cube-shaped entry loggia. One three-story wing contained servants bedrooms on a lower level; kitchen, dining and utility rooms on the main floor; and children and master bedrooms above. The other wing, on a split level from the first, was comprised of the enormous Great Hall and ancillary public spaces. One dramatic architectural flourish would be a cluster of overlapping circular pools, including the requested "sea pool" (sans portals), that descended from the house to the shoreline. A covered walk extended from the house to a two-bedroom guest home/green house at the western edge of the property.

According to the client's request, the architectural style was more reminiscent of Taliesin than the flat-roofed Usonian structures Wright had recently developed. Foundations were of familiar flagstone masonry. Roofs were pitched and shingled in classic prairie-style. Compared to Wright's other significant projects in development at this time--Florida Southern University, the Auldebrass Plantation, and the Affleck house--the Nesbitt residence may indicate, as did the Herbert F. Johnson (Wingspread) residence of 1937, the final evolution of the prairie home.

There are, in fact, several spatial connections between the Nesbitt design and earlier prairie homes both built and un-built. Like the Coonley House and Booth House Project, the Nesbitt design is centered around a two-story cube with wings spreading out in either direction. Likewise the elevated dining room of the Booth design, situated over the porte-cochere, is echoed in the Nesbitt project where the Great Hall is raised over an open loggia beneath. The inner walls of this loggia were to be enclosed in floor-to-ceiling glass walls, while the outer rim would remain open to the beach and ocean beyond. Passing through the double entry doors, the visitor would experience Wright's

famous flair for spatial dramatics, passing from a dark, low-ceilinged area into a lush inner-garden, illuminated by a magnificent a skylight high overhead.

To the left, a few steps led up to the dining area and access to the kitchen and bedroom wing. Ahead would be the grand stair-case to the Great Hall, comprised of hanging metal risers. It was in Nesbitt's "splendid spacious central hall" that Wright pulled out all the stops. A bedroom is a bedroom. A kitchen a kitchen. But to Wright a living room is a symphony, a stage set, and a refuge all in one. It is the multiplicity of uses that require brilliance on the part of a designer, and in the Nesbitt home, Wright designed his largest living room ever. Even the 55-foot living room of the Little house, now reconstructed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, would be dwarfed in comparison to the Nesbitt Great Hall.

This public wing of the home is actually three spaces, each sharing a level floor plane, but differentiated by ceiling height. The main Great Hall extends at a 90 degree angle from the kitchen-bedroom wing of the home. It is terminated at one end by the grand entry staircase, and at the other by a large fireplace. To either side, rows of stone pillars extend 15 feet to the pitched roof above. When facing the fireplace, a billiard and wet bar "room" extends behind the stone columns to the right, under a standard height flat ceiling. To the left, the floor space fans out to form a triangular "Sea Lounge," again under a standard height flat ceiling. This lounge has its own smaller fireplace and opens onto an ocean-facing balcony. The total area of these combined spaces is over ??? square feet.

Wright's design, including the guest house and four-car parking shed, is a poetic response to the rugged coastal site. Filled with unique interwoven spaces, sheltered hideaways, and Wagnerian drama, it would have ranked, if built, as one of Wright's most memorable works. The fact that it was not built, however, owed as much to Wright's casual business practices, as it did to historic world events and the budgetary concerns of the client.

Nesbitt had first requested a home from Wright in July of 1940, and expected plans within a year, with construction to take place in 1942 or '43. It was not until late September that the topographical map and plaster model were set to Taliesin. Preliminary designs based on the model and on Nesbitt's detailed letters, proceeded through October and November. By December, the preliminary sketches had been completed and sent to Nesbitt with Wright's offer to "make any modifications you suggest."

Wright also attempted to clarify his fee: "My services for thirty years past have been reckoned on only one fee basis, the same for \$10,000.00 or \$10,000,000. And that is ten percent for complete services including building, furniture, planting and general supervision. In this way (like many a doctor) I make the big commissions enable me to do modest residences which I think are most important...sketches (preliminaries) are 3% of this total fee. The plans and specifications made ready to build - 5% more. The letting of contracts and general supervision - the final 2%. All fees are finally reckoned upon cost of completed work. We often earn the fees a number of times over." He goes on: "I think we should not begin by deceiving ourselves too much with any preliminary figure less than \$50,000.00."

This was, of course, \$10,000 greater than the high-end of Nesbitt's original request and would place Wright's total fee on the project at \$5000. Nesbitt had by this time sent Wright a check for \$2000, this based on his proposal (written in a letter of July 31, 1940) of "5% of an estimated 10% commission on a completed forty thousand dollar project." In December, Wright noted that the cost of preliminaries on this regular fee basis would be \$1,500 or 3% of \$50,000. Actual plans "would add \$2,500 to this when you were satisfied with them," for a total of \$4000. The discrepancies between Wright's and Nesbitt's payment schedule, the estimated total building cost, and mistaken assumptions on both parts would, within a year, reduce an amiable architect-client relationship to bitterness and acrimony.

In January of 1941, however, John Nesbitt was eager to proceed. In a letter mis-dated as January 17 of 1940 (it clearly must have been 1941), he wrote of his desire to settle “orientation” and “aesthetics” problems and build the guest house in the spring or summer. Nesbitt’s plan was to live in the guest house while the main house was under construction. The revisions to the preliminary drawings were delayed when Wright was involved in a car accident near Fresno, California in late January. The apprentice at the wheel was unhurt, but Wright suffered a back injury that kept him in bed for weeks. In late February, Nesbitt wrote that he would “give you an uncomfortable afternoon” going over the plans when Wright recuperated. He also proposed building the lower and main floors of the main house bedroom/kitchen wing, then build the upper floor at a later stage and the guest house last. Already, it appears the buyer was concerned at the scope of the project, but was unable or unwilling to have Wright scale it back.

The two men also began discussion on another venture--a biography and film that might broaden Wright’s appeal to the masses. Nesbitt encouraged Wright to “get your life product out of the damned Museum of Modern Art and the 1938 Architectural Forum and into the emotions of the people.” As an example, he cited the relative lack of interest in the work of Vincent Van Gogh until “Lust for Life” became a best-selling biography. “One year after the book was printed,” Nesbitt wrote, “three hundred and fifty thousand people (one third of the total population) of San Francisco paid fifty cents to look at fifty Van Gogh canvases.”

Perhaps unaware of Wright’s successful autobiography, Nesbitt felt a “thrilling biography...and after that, a powerful motion picture,” would spread Wright’s work to the masses. “You are not a ‘famous’ or a ‘celebrated’ man, but only an eminent one. Or a ‘great architect.’ To us, that has the remote sound of ‘great endocrinologist.’” He referenced a “scorn” Wright expressed regarding moving pictures, but assured him that as long as one has “absolute censorship over the final ‘shooting script’ there can be no worry about the falsification usually considered essential to entertainment.” The project

proceeded with discussion of shooting Technicolor film of Taliesin, perhaps for one of Nesbitt's MGM short films. Nesbitt even planned to discuss the project with Producer Walter Wanger and the famed Director Orson Welles. Wright and Welles had previously met on the set of "Magnificent Ambersons," and the prospect of their collaboration stirs the imagination, but the motion picture, like the house itself, came to nothing.

In late February of 1941, Wright's secretary, Eugene Masselink, wrote Nesbitt that Wright would soon begin working on the construction plans and requested a check for this new stage of work. It was not until early April that Nesbitt replied with a check and questions regarding the contracts for ongoing revisions to the Ennis house. Four days later, Wright wrote again requesting \$500 and assuring him that all fees "will come out in the wash in a way that will gratify you." This may be the most succinct summation possible of Wright's overall attitude toward financial matters.

Later that month, a contract was finally written for changes to the Ennis house with the flat fee of \$3500. Interior perspective drawings of Ennis, showing the placement of newly designed furniture, have been archived alongside drawings and plans of the Carmel project and share its archival number of 4711. Nesbitt found inaccuracies in the plans for Ennis, including a nook in the dining area where none existed. Through this same period, he continued to gather information for the Carmel construction, including suppliers of building materials. It was not until June, however, that Wright and five apprentices started work on what would become 23 pages of working drawings. Nesbitt planned to fly to Wisconsin where Wright was now settled at his summer residence, Taliesin, but it is unclear if he actually made the trip. He requested copies of the plans in mid-July and was still waiting for them a month later.

By late August, Nesbitt's communications took on a decidedly nervous tone. The cost of giving the Ennis house a "face-lift" would exceed the \$3500 budgeted. Even more disconcerting were the opinions of other architects Nesbitt consulted about the Carmel project (these architects may have included Lautner who was working on the

Ennis home, and Richard Nuetra, another acquaintance of Nesbitt's). They estimated the cost of constructing the Carmel Home to be \$70,000. In one letter to Masselink, Nesbitt noted the financial concerns expressed by his wife as the reason for his lack of comment on the plans, and again reiterated his desire to build the home in stages. "The tendency is to blame Mr. Wright when a plan looks costly," he wrote, "but in honesty, it contains just about the number of rooms and features which I originally asked him for, so I can't kick too hard."

At this point a curious lapse in communication occurs, with no correspondence until December. It is here, of course, that the winds of international fate intervened in what had been the rocky, but not entirely uncommon genesis of a Wright building. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 not only placed America in a state of war, but reverberated through the business and social lives of millions in ways large and small. One of those reverberations was the end of the Nesbitt house.

With fears of an impending invasion, coastal property values plummeted, complicating Nesbitt's plan to sell the Ennis house. The funds from that sale were critical to financing the construction in Carmel and without them, even a staged construction could not proceed. Adding to the uncertainty were the pending rationing of building materials, and Nesbitt's own service in the war effort. The youthful Nesbitt, just 31, was initially drafted to work in armed forces radio in Washington DC, but was later directed to remain in Los Angeles and work on war-department films. There he lent his sonorous voice to such informational and propaganda efforts as "Mr. Blabbermouth!" and "We do it Because..." Without his lucrative MGM salary, however, and unable to extricate himself from the Ennis House, Nesbitt became even more concerned with financial matters.

In December, Nesbitt wrote to Wright objecting to requested fees on the Ennis house, citing that only three interior sketches had been received and that Wright had earlier agreed to waive his fees until the house had been sold. He also rejected Wright's

fees on the Carmel project, which Wright now based on a total cost of \$57,000. “Since I asked you for a thirty thousand dollar house (see letter of July 1940),” he wrote, “and you told me that I might come to as much as fifty thousand dollars (January 1941) how on earth can I, a confused client, know how much money to get ready to pay you? If a client must fee an architect not on the basis of his original request, but on what the architect designs for him, then the architect might well plan a hundred thousand dollar house and charge accordingly.”

Wright, not surprisingly, did not embrace Nesbitt’s position, and adopted a paternalistic tone in his response, dated December 22. “When a man reaches the stage you have now reached, there is no argument. Simply stated, he has undertaken something he now finds unprofitable, but for which he must pay. He will pay as little as possible. How little he pays will depend on his character and the force of circumstances.” But if Wright was frustrated at the financial loss, he was equally aware of the creative loss: “Apparently we have both lost. I have lost because at this time in my life I can’t afford to put dreams on paper to be left there for a sum of money that merely pays for time on a wage basis. Of course I am more than disappointed. I am frustrated. And I hate to see a young man like you pay money for something he can’t use if he wanted to. But I hate, more than that, to see him try to reverse himself to save money, crawfish and lie.”

Wright’s position was that the \$30K house Nesbitt originally requested didn’t include the cost of the guest house. Perhaps Nesbitt felt it did. Wright further asserted his sketches were for a house of \$40K and a guest house of \$10K, with an additional \$5,700 in landscaping. He wrote, “These costs were guaranteed cost limits if not altered during construction. I was prepared to stand back of them.”

Wright goes on to note that Nesbitt approved the sketches and the subsequent plans, agreed to pay for them, and wanted to build as far as \$30,000 would provide. Clearly this is a reference to Nesbitt’s intention of building the home in stages. Wright

also felt Nesbitt's desire to rehabilitate the Ennis home was a "promise you held out to me. Your mind changed about that, but you did not notify me. You let me go on with the work and waste myself upon it...You agreed definitely to give me \$3500 to work with and pay a fee of \$700 to return the place to the status of my original intentions."

Wright offered a solution with a veiled implication of avoiding legal proceedings. Considering the wide range of home plans he had worked on, at varying budgets, he offered to design another home at whatever budget Nesbitt could afford. "So if you pay up as agreed for this venture into the future, I will engage in writing to supply you (and to your satisfaction) with completely new plans and we will proceed with no charge whatever for the additional scheme and additional work, except the two percent fee for superintendence." Wright concluded, "You may never build. I may die. But reason can no further go with generosity in these circumstances where I am concerned with a young man who had a champagne appetite only to realize (suddenly after it was all over) that his was a beer income if any. And War came to grin at it all."

If Wright hoped for a contrite and apologetic acceptance of his offer, he was to be disappointed. In a detailed four-page letter, Nesbitt attempted to "clear up some of the points simply for the record and then proceed to a final positive offer." He had never given up plans to alter the Ennis house, he wrote, and reiterated his willingness to pay for the plans once he received them. He suggested handling the matter through the American Arbitration Board to save time and money. Regarding his financial state, he wrote that employment had not deserted him and he was in "exceedingly healthy business circumstances" and that "inability to pay has been no factor in my disagreement with you." He merely has "declined to pay any sum until the basis of payment was made clearly."

Nesbitt claimed his request that the guest house in Carmel be designed as a "complete living unit" so that he may "rent it temporarily as a tax payer" was ignored, as was his request for a model of the Carmel house, and a written schedule of fees. He then

outlined his own proposal to modify and not “tear up” the Carmel plans. The Ennis and Carmel projects would be lumped together. He would pay \$1,000 by the end of January; \$500 at the end of March; \$1,500 “Immediately upon completion and acceptance of modified Carmel Plans”; and \$600 for “building supervision for Modified Carmel House.”

Apparently, Nesbitt now hoped to build just the Guest House in some modified form and felt this was very close to Wright’s own suggestion of a new design. “We are arguing not about results, but about method,” he wrote. He closed his proposal with the “rider” that any further dealings be clearly set down in writing. “While I recognize that you dislike crippling conditions, I cannot meet obligations unless I know what to expect. If for example, I blithely ask for certain architecture features that would run costs beyond the limit, who is to instruct me save my architect?”

This last statement reflects the central lapse in communication between client and architect: that Nesbitt requested a house that exceeded his targeted budget and yet Wright never bothered to tell him. It may be inevitable that creative individuals focus on the creative work and not the underlying financial costs associated with each decision. This is certainly the concern of the client, but perhaps Wright again hoped it would “work itself out in the wash” as had been the case with many other clients who found themselves grudgingly but willingly paying more for a Wright home than they had ever intended.

Whatever the case, Wright’s initial acceptance of Nesbitt’s proposal changed, upon further reflection, to firm rejection. “Upon re-reading the proposal carefully,” he wrote, “I see you have taken advantage of my generous offer to save you by taking more work upon myself and that you have made it the only condition on which you will pay anything for what I have already done...Of course I couldn’t make a mark on paper for you after the revulsion of feeling that came over me when I realized your game...No, John, I am through with you as a client, a friend, or a man. The very thought of you

makes me sick and would prevent me from doing anything fine or worthwhile for you. I want my plans back. All of them. And I don't want any money you have or can ever get."

"These plans were lovingly inspired by your lovely piece of ground and complete faith in you and admiration for you," Wright continued. "And I looked upon you as the savior of opus Glendower [the Ennis House]. You have looked upon a masterpiece and that, if my hunch is right, is as near as you will ever come to one, while you live. I can only work for those I respect and admire, because I must work with love and understanding coming and going otherwise my pencil is dead."

Wright demanded the return of all plans and sketches of the Carmel and Ennis projects as "instruments of service" and noted that he would ask his son Lloyd to pick them up. He closed with a final dramatic flourish: "Here lies one Nesbitt. The young man who inspired a fine work he can not touch if he would and that is now without a name in the archives of the future as Opus 437."

It would take a year before Nesbitt returned all drawings and plans. And even after that he would exchange the occasional letter with Wright, who later took on the role of a forgiving parent. Wright lived another 17 years, until 1958, and finally did build a house on the beach in Carmel. The Walker residence of 1948 hugs the rocky coastline so tightly it appears to have grown up from its rugged outcropping. Nesbitt eventually built a home designed by Richard Nuetra in Los Angeles' Brentwood area. He died in 1960 at the age of 50, in Carmel.

The lessons of "Opus 437" exemplify the emotional minefield of a client-architect relationship. There is little doubt that John Nesbitt, infatuated with Wright's work as so many clients were, bit off more than he could chew in the attempt to not only restore the Ennis Home, but build a significant home hundreds of miles to the north. Building a substantial home may be an undertaking best suited to one's middle age, when maturity

and deliberation temper desire and enthusiasm. There is also little doubt that Wright embraced a vision for the site that was greater than the client anticipated. It is, of course, the designer's responsibility to bring a vision to the table that is beyond the capability of the layman. It is also, however, a practical reality that an architect must also evaluate and understand not only the architectural needs of a client, but their financial capabilities as well.

What if Nesbitt had requested a less expensive design? What if Wright had provided one? What if the final documents hadn't taken most of 1941 to prepare? Construction may have begun in the spring or summer of that year as Nesbitt had originally planned. What if Wright had been more proactive in outlining a clear schedule of fees, rather than attempting to assuage a financially conservative client that it would "all come out in the wash"? What if the Japanese had not attacked Pearl Harbor?

Rhetorical questions have the benefit of never being answered. There is one undeniable result from the ill-fated relationship between Wright and Nesbitt: a beautiful set of 23 construction documents, with scores of other preliminary sketches and interior perspectives. Where most unfinished Wright designs never progressed beyond presentation drawings, the Nesbitt home went the distance. Opus 437 awaits.

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