Fallingwater
by Robert McCarter

University of Pennsylvania Library
by Edward R. Bosley

by Lauren Uhl

Phaidon Press has launched a handsome series called "Architecture in Detail." Each volume focuses on a single distinguished building and its architect. Two volumes in the series feature buildings in Pennsylvania — Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater in Bear Run, and the University of Pennsylvania Library in Philadelphia, designed by Frank Furness. The format is the same for each book. In a slim 60 pages, you get a brief history of the architect and his work, a description and history of the building, and chronology. The 12-inch square, soft-bound format is unwieldy to read unless you are sitting at a table or stretched out on the floor, but the size allows the text to be surrounded by photographs which make the text much more meaningful, and the layout of each volume is very attractive.

I found the books on Fallingwater and the University Library to be an interesting contrast. Although identical in layout, style, and format, I had very different reactions to each book. One reinforced why I love architecture and find old buildings endlessly fascinating; the other reinforced a quandary I often find myself facing: while I love to look at old buildings, I rarely read architectural history because I find so much of it oppressively dull or just plain incomprehensible.

Fallingwater, named by the American Institute of Architects as the best American building of the last 125 years, is surely Western Pennsylvania's most acclaimed architectural treasure. It was built in 1936 for Edgar Kaufmann, owner of Kaufmann's department store in Pittsburgh, and his wife Lillian. Bear Run, about 90 minutes southeast of Pittsburgh in the Laurel Highlands, had long been a family retreat. Kaufmann leased the acreage in 1913 for use as a summer and weekend camp for his employees. In 1921, he and Lillian built a rustic cabin there.

The Kaufmann's acquaintance with Frank Lloyd Wright came through their son, Edgar Jr., who, in 1934, joined Wright's Taliesan Fellowship. At his one-man architecture school in Spring Green, Wisconsin, Wright offered apprenticeships where students learned drafting, construction, and Wright's personal vision of architecture. During a visit to Taliesan, the senior Kaufmanns invited Wright to join them at Bear Run to discuss replacing their cabin with a newer, more substantial country house. Bear Run proved perfect for Wright's concept of "organic architecture." According to Wright, "it is in the nature of any organic building to grow from its site... the ground itself held always as a component basic part of the building itself." The Kaufmanns expected a home that would face their favorite spot, the waterfall. Wright gave them a house that included the waterfall. Wright's uncanny sense of structure and use of materials allowed him to cantilever balconies directly over the falls, allowing it to become an integral part of the house.

Construction of the house occasionally pitted the extremely self-confident Wright against his more cautious client. Concerned about the structural integrity of the balconies and their use of reinforced concrete over long spans, Kaufmann had Wright's plans inspected by his own structural engineers. When Wright received their report, he demanded that Kaufmann return the plans "since he did not deserve the house." Amendments were made and the project continued, but not without some trepidation on the part of Kaufmann and his consultants.

Insights into the history of the house and its construction are interesting, but the book becomes hopelessly ponderous when McCarter, chair of the Department of Architecture at the University of Florida, attempts to "break the prevailing silence about the spatial experience of Fallingwater." What he does is give a verbal tour of the house liberally interspersed with incomprehensible architectural philosophy: "The house-as-a-place brings the landscape into focus, into presence, to be experienced as part of human life. Only places where man has decided to dwell, can make the site fully present for us." Nature with a building on it is better than just nature — spoken like an architect. The prose doesn't do justice to one of the country's most intriguing homes. Fortunately, Fallingwater is as photogenic as any supermodel, so skip the second half of the text and dwell on the photos. In fairness, Fallingwater really is a building that begs to be "experienced" in person. It is difficult to adequately describe it with mere words. Nevertheless, having been to Fallingwater, I still found it hard to follow along on the verbal tour.

By contrast, I found the writing about the University of Pennsylvania Library nearly as engaging as the spectacular full-page color photos. Frank Furness was a late Victorian Philadelphia architect with a distinct and quirky style. He designed several buildings for Pittsburgh, including the B & O Railroad terminal and the Farmer's Deposit National Bank. Unfortunately, none of his Pittsburgh work survives. Much like his apprentice Louis Sullivan, (who, coincidentally, was a mentor to Frank Lloyd Wright) Furness' buildings are visually rich. You have to look at them for a long time to take in all the detail.

The historic context is engagingly written and gives the reader an understanding of the forces that came together in Furness' life — family, time, and place — to develop this building. Furness grew up in a financially comfortable and intellectually stimulating household. He served with distinction in the Civil War, then joined the atelier of Richard Morris Hunt. Hunt was the first American to train at the Ecole des Beaux-arts in Paris. Although Furness' early designs reflected the formal historical tradition he learned from Hunt, he soon began to find his own
style and to develop signature elements, including incised floral motifs, squat and paired columns, and visually striking combinations of building materials.

For this project, Furness conferred with the foremost library theoreticians of the day — Justine Winsor, head of Boston Public Library, then librarian at Harvard University, and Melvil Dewey, inventor of the Dewey Decimal System. However, it appears that Furness already had a workable plan for the building before meeting with the consultants. In the late 19th century, there were three common plans for libraries: a high-ceilinged reading room lined with tall book cases; a reading room surrounded by alcoves; and a series of reading rooms. Furness designed his library with stacks separate from the main reading room. And he included an ingenious plan for expansion. Additional stacks could be accommodated by pushing out the south wall on screw jacks. This was never tried, however, because of an unanticipated design flaw: the fenestration pattern made the stacks heat up like a greenhouse.

In this book, the words and photographs work together to give you a virtual reality tour of the building. Well, close anyway. The photo of the main reading room makes you feel like you're standing inside it and the descriptions really do help you look carefully at the photos. In fact, the book was so enticing it made me want to see the building in person, even as it made me feel I already had. 

Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh: Volume II, The Post-Steel Era
by Roy Lubove

by John Hinshaw

Since it first appeared in 1969, Roy Lubove’s Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change has stood as a classic account of how Pittsburgh’s power structure operated. At the turn of the 20th century, numerous observers in Pittsburgh found that the human need for decent housing, safe working conditions, and public sanitation were sacrificed to facilitate the creation of a favorable business climate for heavy industry. Until the 1930s, municipal governments, dominated by the Republican Party, lacked the will or power to challenge the air or water pollution created, for example, by U.S. Steel’s mills or the railroads and aluminum mills of the Mellon family.

After the mid-1930s, the Democratic Party dominated city and county politics, but the corporations still called the shots. The economic stimulus of World War II exacerbated Pittsburgh’s already staggering environmental problems and threatened its longterm economic viability as corporations openly considered relocating to more pleasant climes. Both political and corporate elites embarked on a “public-private partnership” to remake the city into a more economically diversified, less polluted, and all-around more livable city. Yet, Lubove found that the “Pittsburgh Renaissance” was less of a fundamental shift in the regional power matrix than a shift in tactics by local elites. The needs of the working-class majority for better housing, more parks, and cleaner neighborhoods, or for democratic control over fundamental societal decisions, were given short shrift. Instead, public resources were lavished on Downtown to satisfy corporate and real estate interests (dominated, not surprisingly, as Lubove noted, by U.S. Steel and the Mellons). The 1960s saw scattered grassroots challenges to this ideology, especially from the black community, but it seemed likely that the needs of corporations and the rich would continue to dominate Pittsburgh’s ongoing Renaissance.

While Lubove’s second volume picks up chronologically where the previous one left off, in the early 1970s, his insight into Pittsburgh’s power dynamics has become cloudy. Lubove, a renowned professor of social work at the University of Pittsburgh who is now deceased, does a wonderful job describing the economic upheaval and political-institutional changes that wracked the region in the wake of plant closings during the last two decades. And the second volume still finds that the “public-private partnership ideology” remains a significant aspect of Pittsburgh’s recent history (page viii). In fact, he shows that this partnership expanded the economic/environmental remaking of Downtown to include sponsorship of neighborhood associations, community development corporations, regional development reports, and high technology councils. His discussions of the changing politics and institutional matrixes involved in community development and heritage preservation, and other issues, are invaluable, as well. In short, Lubove’s ample documentation of how Pittsburgh entered the post-industrial era makes this volume a valuable survey of the many important events and controversies in the city since 1970.

Unfortunately, Lubove apparently succumbed to the public-private partnership’s aggressive cultural boosterism that glorified post-Renaissance Pittsburgh’s “quality of life” while placing the high-wage, high-pollution past into its appropriate historical context, e.g., products of a “dinosaur economy” (25). Rather surprisingly, he has trouble comprehending that “many Pittsburghers (not just members of the elite) acquiesced in relegating the area’s steel-centered, heavy industry legacy to the care of historians and preservationists” (ix). The author of volume one of Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh would have vigorously dissected the assumptions built into the economic imperative rationale for deindustrialization. In volume two, Lubove reproduces the public-private leadership’s rationale for the low-wage/green path to post-industrial Pittsburgh.

Lubove considers Pittsburgh’s reliance on heavy industry into the 1960s more than the unfortunate result of “overspecialization” (3). Clearly, given a choice between a “paleotechnic nineteenth-century economy of coal and steel” with “a post-steel economy