

THE WRIGHT WAY



BAYER LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE BRINGS THE DARWIN MARTIN HOUSE LANDSCAPE BACK INTO FULL BLOOM.

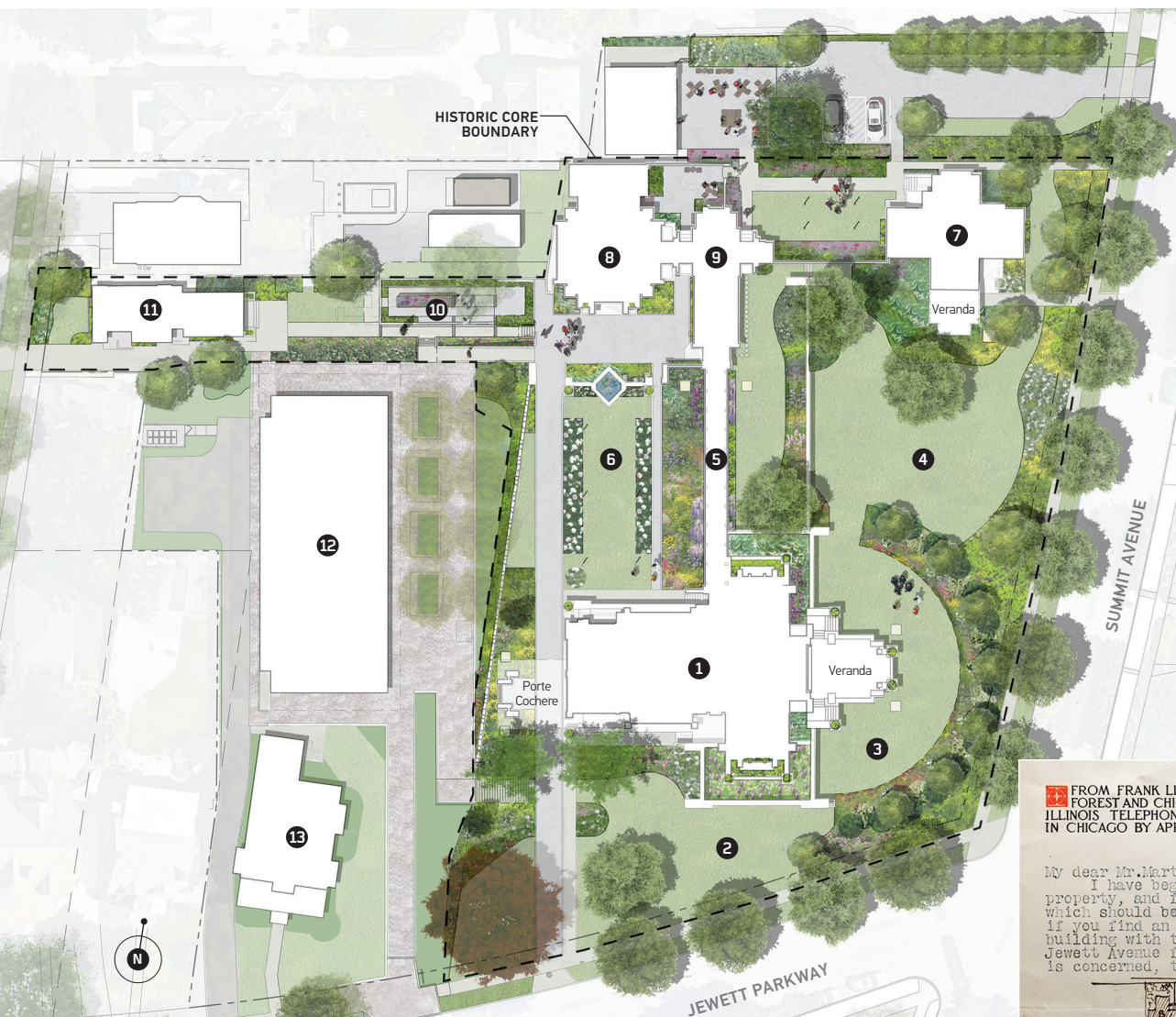
BY JOANN GRECO

ABOVE
Daylilies and phlox
are thriving along the
terrace with the pergola
in the background.

Darwin and Isabelle Martin were getting tired of waiting. “We want a garden,” Darwin wrote to their architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, late in 1903. “We do not want the whole thing a lawn.” And so, the following fall, the restless couple went ahead and ordered quantities of shrubs and vines. Shortly after the rugosa rose and clematis, and the wisteria and

snowberry, arrived, Darwin wrote to Wright again: “We have coaxed so long for the planting plan (and we have been assured we would have it before needed) that we gave up expecting it,” he chided. “[A]nd as the shrubs were drying up, we planted them Saturday and enclose this photograph showing how they were planted.”

Martin, a high-ranking executive with the Larkin Soap Company, had begun buying lots in the tony Buffalo, New York, neighborhood of Parkside in the late 1880s. When he decided to build a new home for his family in 1902, he settled on a particularly large corner site, which Wright—with whom he had been discussing a possible commission



PLAN

- 1 MARTIN HOUSE
- 2 JEWETT PARKWAY FRONTAGE
- 3 FLORICYCLE
- 4 SUMMIT LAWN
- 5 PERGOLA
- 6 KITCHEN COURTYARD
- 7 BARTON HOUSE
- 8 CARRIAGE HOUSE
- 9 CONSERVATORY
- 10 HISTORIC GARDEN FOOTPRINT
- 11 GARDENER'S COTTAGE
- 12 VISITOR CENTER
- 13 MARTIN HOUSE OFFICE

BOTTOM RIGHT

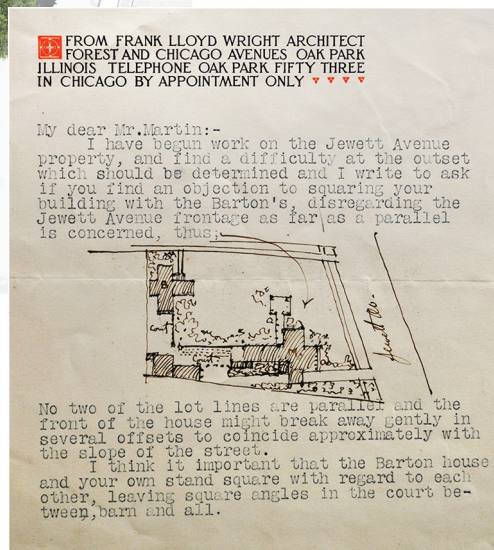
A letter and early sketch plan from Frank Lloyd Wright explaining his thinking on the orientation of the Martin House.

to design Larkin's new downtown headquarters—championed. Martin soon accumulated some adjacent property and in 1903 engaged the master architect to design a residential compound on the now approximately 1.5-acre lot. By 1909, the property included not only the main 15,000-square-foot home, but a house for Delta and George Barton (Darwin Martin's sister and her husband) as well as several outbuildings and structures.

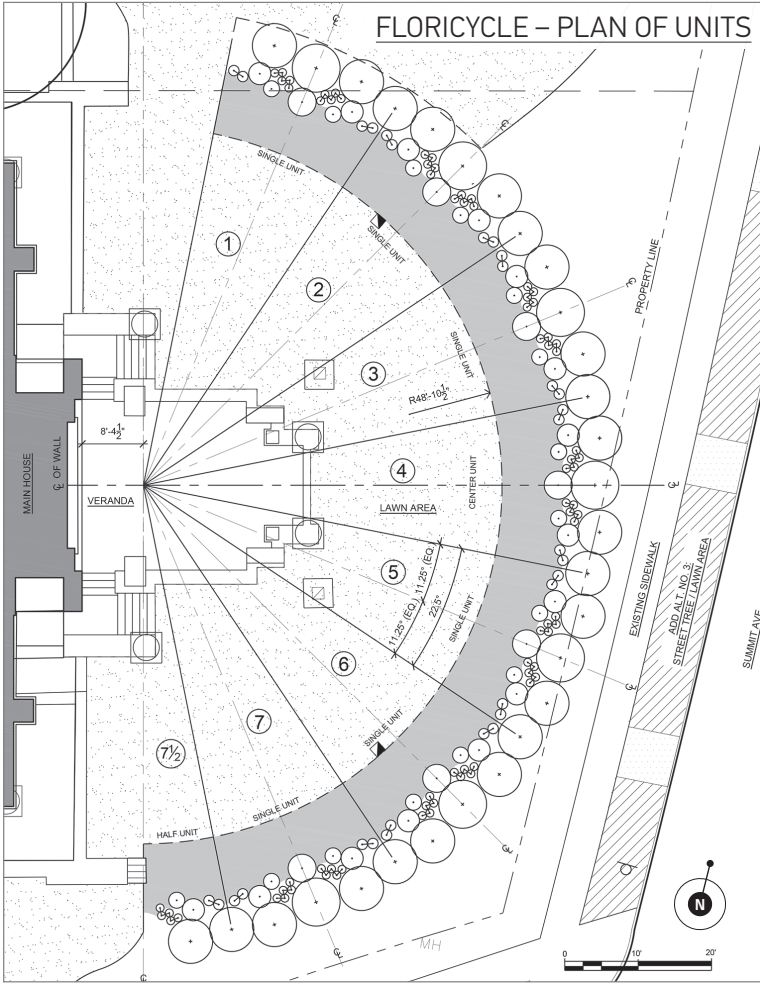
A planting plan eventually arrived too, and the Martins enjoyed their Wright-designed landscape for three

decades until the family abandoned the property soon after Darwin Martin's death in 1935.

By the time Mark H. Bayer, ASLA, visited the site in 2014, though, that landscape had been reduced to little more than the lawn that the Martins had so desperately wanted to avoid. Perfunctory rows of annuals and bulbs edged its swaths of green turf, and only a handful of original trees and ornamental vines remained. "I thought, wow, this is a great blank slate," recalls Bayer, who is the principal of Bayer Landscape Architecture in Honeoye Falls, New York.



Bayer and a few colleagues from his firm had come at the invitation of Mary Roberts, the executive director of Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House Corporation, the nonprofit that owns and operates what has become one of the city's most popular tourist destinations. The landscape architects, along



with Charles Birnbaum, FASLA, the president of the Cultural Landscape Foundation; Margo Stipe, the director and curator of collections for the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation; and Ann Talarek, a horticulturist at Fall-ingwater, were convening to hash out the idea of producing a cultural land-scape report that would document the property’s history, assess its current conditions, and provide treatment recommendations.

Since it was formed in 1992, the nonprofit (formerly known as the Martin House Restoration Corpora-tion) had slowly tackled the steps of a master plan, investing \$50 million in reviving the complex. The effort included the reconstruction of the conservatory, pergola, and carriage

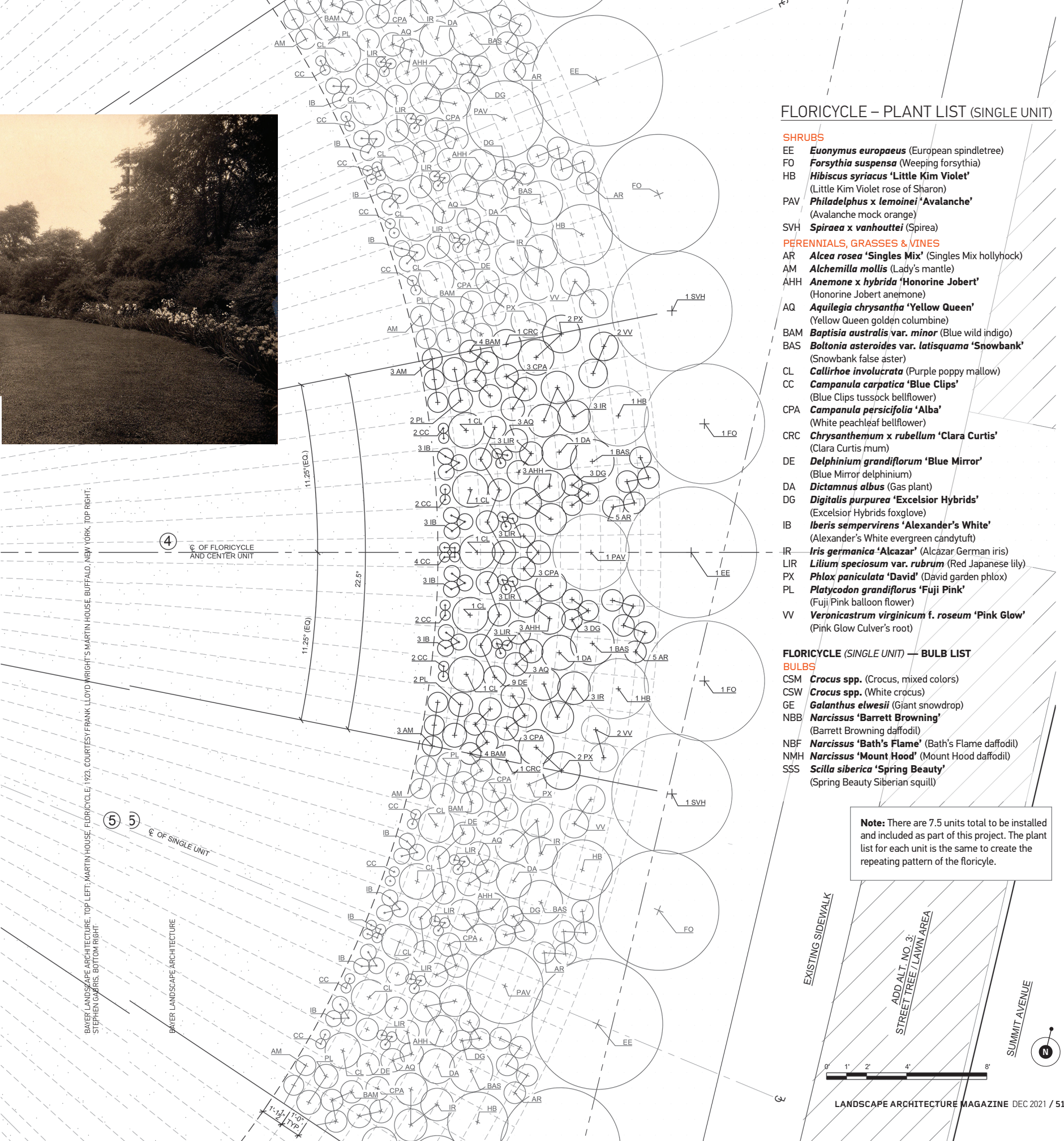
house, all demolished in 1962, as well as the repair of the roof and exterior of the main house and a meticulous restoration of its interiors. Along the way, a gift shop, visitor center, and café were introduced. Finally, just as the landscape had come to fruition at the very end of the Wright commission, its rehabili-tation would cap this project.

It was time, once again, to make a garden.

Bayer’s boutique firm, which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary and now employs six landscape archi-tects, counts landscape preservation among its specialties. In fact, the Mar-tin House landscape—installed in 2019—isn’t the firm’s only experience

on a Wright landscape. In 2013, its work on the gardens at Wright’s E. E. Boynton House in Rochester, New York, received a Merit Award from ASLA’s Upstate New York Chapter.

“We were impressed by every as-pect of Bayer’s work,” Roberts says, “from the depth of their knowledge on historic species and cultivars to their understanding of Wright’s psy-chology to their appreciation of the specific demands of the estate. This landscape is integral to the totality of Wright’s design and demonstrates his central belief that buildings should relate to and complement nature.” The gardens, she adds, “are



TOP RIGHT
 A 1923 photograph of the floricycle with iris in bloom and maturing shrubs in the background.

BOTTOM RIGHT
 The elegant form and flower of Culver's root.



LEFT

An aerial view of the floricycle in the early morning light. The semicircular form is organized around the center line of the veranda.

the final element in what makes the Martin House so special, and they also offer us new programming and interpretation opportunities.”

Bayer points out that many of Wright’s basic plans include landscapes, but he emphasizes that in this case the architect was more heavily involved than usual. “You can see how he was very interested in the spatial qualities, how space could be shaped by the buildings and the plantings,” he says. “The plans reveal someone thinking about outdoor spaces as much as indoor ones. It’s there in the way the landscape flows through the complex via the pergola and how the covered veranda overlooks the floricycle.”

Wright’s term for a half-circle feature planted to ensure sequential blooming from spring through autumn, the “floricycle” is one of several distinct units into which Bayer divided the grounds, based on historic research and existing conditions. An entry, lawn, terrace, and courtyard plantings, as well as several gardens associated with the house, round out the landscape. (The project also involved the planting of nine New Harmony elms and nine Princeton American elms on the surrounding streets, plus five more of the disease-resistant trees on the property itself, to replace those that had fallen victim to Dutch elm disease in the mid-1950s.) Other

aspects of the firm's work focused on elements related to the tourist experience. These include improved circulation and accessibility and better lighting and wayfinding. The team added an extensive drainage system and used custom soil mixes in the lawn areas to accommodate today's much heavier foot traffic.

This spring, the already-mature result (grown phenomenally since the 2019 planting) unveiled itself to the public, wowing visitors newly emerged from their pandemic cocoons. On one sunny July day, Bayer stood outside the Toshiko Mori-designed visitor center and waited for a tour group to pass. He walked toward the planting beds near the main house and pointed out the blooming clusters of yellow day-lily and white hydrangea, fragrant honeysuckle shrubs and memorial rose—all very prevalent in the planting plans, he noted.

Rounding the house, he approached the floricycle, where a series of identically planted, wedge-shaped beds meld into each other to form a crescent overflowing with summertime perennials including hollyhock, bell-flower, phlox, and delphinium. Later, in the fall, chrysanthemum, aster, and anemone will bloom. As the foreground shifts with the season,



the backdrop of shrubs—including mock orange, spirea, and hibiscus—will continue to serve as the verdant privacy screen between the property and the street that the Martins had requested.

It wasn't easy trying to replicate the original planting schemes—certain species like a specific yellow columbine were no longer available—or even to figure them out. Bayer recalls examining murky black and white photos of the hemicycle taken over the years as the gardens became more and more overgrown. “Spring-time images, for example, went from [showing] dozens of species to basically [being reduced to] irises in the foreground and forsythia in the background, with all of the complexity and diversity lost in between,” he says. “You could see the challenges of maintaining that density.”

The time Bayer and the team spent laying out “hundreds and hundreds” of planted pots in grids to create the floricycle remains among his favorite moments. To keep the plantings from becoming too dense they reduced the number of wedges (from 11.5 units down to 7.5) and dramatically culled plantings while staying “very true to the plan,” Bayer says. “We were fortunate because the plans for the floricycle were some of our most intact.” In other garden rooms, where there were gaps in the plans, he adds, “there was a sense of, we don't know exactly what they did *here*, but let's try for the spirit of what they did *there*. That's why we refer to it as a rehabilitation rather than a restoration.”

While conducting research, Bayer's team returned day after day to the State University of New York at Buffalo (which in the late 1960s purchased

ABOVE RIGHT

Looking north across the top of the floricycle from the Jewett Parkway sidewalk. Panicked hydrangea flowers are emerging and are set against the upright foliage of false aster.



ABOVE
A view through brick piers to the kitchen courtyard's perennial border flanking the pergola. *Coreopsis*, *Phlox*, and *Chrysanthemum* are in full bloom with a peony border along the right side of the path.

what remained of the Martin complex, at one point using the main house as its president's residence) and visited the Wright archives at Columbia University. Not only did they look for clues by peering at faded photos, but they leafed through letters, dug into the diaries in which Martin so diligently noted progress and delays, and pored over worn plans. "This project is all about detail—historic detail and design detail," says Joshua Raymor, ASLA, the senior project manager. "It was great having the opportunity to travel back in time to understand and interpret the design thinking and concepts developed by Wright and his associates, and then take that understanding to inform the rehabilitation of the landscape."

The landscape architects used their research to cement a period of significance—from 1903 to 1929—

for the grounds that represents a considerable expansion of the years cited on the property's listings on the National Register of Historic Places (1903–1905) and National Historic Landmarks (1904). The period begins with the construction of the Barton House landscape and ends, according to the cultural landscape report, when "Martin's immense loss of wealth during the stock market crash of 1929, combined with his failing health, ultimately results in the decline of the landscape and the loss of its features." Their research also led them to conclude that Walter Burley Griffin, a landscape architect who worked in Wright's office and later went on to design the Australian capital of Canberra, assisted with many details for the Martin House, including significant contributions to its planting design. "Griffin was certainly a key mem-

ber of this team," Bayer says, before adding that "ultimately it's Wright's hand that is responsible for how the buildings are placed on the site, which in turn sets the stage for the garden itself."

The clients, old and new, also played an important role. "Darwin Martin was the perfect fit for Wright," Roberts says, pointing out that they became lifelong friends. "He had the active interest in horticulture and the financial wherewithal to indulge Wright. He was all in, going back and forth to discuss elements for months, years even. I love that not only were the Martins constantly frustrated by Wright's inability to deliver on time, but at one point, their gardener even quit because there was no garden for him to care for!"

Bayer in turn cites his own "client that didn't stint" for the contributions in bringing back to life "what is probably the most intensely considered landscape to come out of Wright's office. I suspect both Wright and the Martins would be quite pleased with the end result." ●

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