

PEDRO GUERRERO, FAMOUS ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHER, INTERSECTS WITH LARKIN

“My name is Pedro Guerrero. I’m a photographer.” It was the first time this nervous young 22 year old had referred to himself as a photographer. And it was with great trepidation that he said this to the most famous architect in the United States, who clearly had not anticipated this visit despite Pedro having written to him for an appointment. Pedro’s father had insisted that instead of lazing around their Mesa, Arizona home after Pedro had dropped out of art college, he go to Taliesin West, Frank Lloyd Wright’s (hereafter, FLW) winter home and studio in Arizona, and apply for a job. The year was 1939. PHOTO 1

Pedro tells, in the introduction to his book, “Picturing Wright: An Album From FLW’s Photographer,” (Pomegranate, 1994), that he had known little about Wright, but there immediately ensued a comfortable rapport. He spread out his sparse portfolio on a drafting table. “My portfolio was a hodgepodge of school inspired still lifes of commercial products, food, fashions and an unnecessary number of nudes on a beach.” (p. 13) PHOTO 2

“I see you have a fondness for the ladies,” commented FLW. Pedro, not sure of how to respond, explained that they were a school assignment. “I like women, of course, but I thought that the nudes show a proficiency that the ham and eggs don’t,” referring to a photo of a plate of food. When Pedro added that he liked the sculptural quality of the photos of the nudes, and then went on to say that Taliesin West was a “sculpture of stone and redwood rising out of the desert,” FLW took note since he, too viewed his own work of architecture as sculpture. They liked each other immediately. (Emily Bills, “A Friendship in Photographs: Pedro E. Guerrero and Frank Lloyd Wright,” 9/14/18) PHOTO 3, 4

“What are you doing now?” asked FLW. “Nothing; I’m unemployed.” “Would you like to work for us?” It was all that quick; that easy, according to Pedro. They quickly came to terms. Pedro acknowledged that he had a lot to learn. FLW’s response: “I’ll teach you. The pay isn’t much but you can eat here. You can start now.” Pp. 13-14.

Thus commenced a relationship that spanned 20 years. His last photo of FLW was taken a few days before Wright’s death on April 19, 1959. (“Picturing Wright” p. 159) For 20 years FLW had placed his trust in Pedro to be his exclusive photographer whenever he had control of the choice. In turn, Pedro fell in love with FLW’s work and travelled frequently to photograph his buildings. PHOTO 5

According to “Picturing Wright,” Pedro became, in effect, part of the Fellowship of students who resided in winter at Taliesin West and in summer at Taliesin North in

Wisconsin. He was unique in his relationship with FLW in that, from the start, they could tease and laugh at each other. Others found FLW rather austere and intimidating. That their relationship could be so relaxed and confident about each other is rather surprising when one considers Pedro's background.

Emily Bell's article, referred to above, provided insight into Pedro's personality. He was born in Arizona, as had his parents. His grandparents had been born in Mexico but lived most of their adult lives in Arizona. His grandfather became Justice of the Peace in their town. Both generations had been hard working, basically successful families. Not rich, but comfortably self-supporting. They all spoke English. But nevertheless, Pedro was required to attend a segregated school of all Hispanics that offered very little real education. Frustrated, Pedro saw little chance of advancing in any career. He followed his brother into art school in a college in California, but dropped out before completing a degree, moving back to Arizona and his parents' home. It appears he had no sense of ever achieving a successful future; he only felt despair.

So the unflinching acceptance by FLW of this unsolicited, inexperienced Hispanic kid was nothing short of a miracle. Pedro was literally launched on a path of becoming one of the most renowned photographers in America, specializing in architecture and in later years, sculpture. Pedro's photos of FLW and his structures sought after for inclusion in exhibits at major galleries around the world and often included personal moments at one of the Taliesin studios. (See Kathryn Smith, "Wright on Exhibit: FLW's Architectural Exhibitions, Princeton Press, 2017)

Not that ethnic bias did not stroke harshly on Pedro's self esteem once in awhile throughout his life. But more of that later.

Professionally, Pedro had sensitive ability to incorporate human qualities in photos of FLW as no other photographer could do. Bell opines that that was due to the father/son-like bond between them. She writes, "This connection, coupled by Guerrero's aptitude for recognizing the human element in oversized personalities is revealed in portraits of the architect that extend from the first year until two weeks before Wright's death. Guerrero thus did more than produce enduring photos that solidify Wright's built legacy, he also sought to understand the architect's interior motivation and provide revealing and empathetic interpretation of the person behind the work."

In 1941 Pedro made a difficult decision. World War I was about to commence and Pedro's father felt that it was very important for Mexican Americans to prove their

loyalty to the U.S. by enlisting in the military. Pedro was caught between the close relationship he had with his father and his respect for him, and the knowledge that to leave would not only interrupt or even end his career in photography but also with FLW. FLW was a passionate pacifist and urged the “boys” in the Fellowship to resist, even if it meant going to prison. With great trepidation, Pedro went to FLW to tell him of his decision and the reason for it. Surprisingly, FLW recognized how important this show of loyalty meant to Pedro, handed him \$200, wished him well and promised him a job on his return.

For a time, Pedro served state side as a photo technician. He was later sent to Italy and ran a photographic laboratory till he returned to the U.S. in 1945 having achieved the rank of Commander. He also had been married and had decided to live with his wife in the New York City area where he anticipated that his Hispanic name and appearance would not be such an issue as it had been in Arizona.

Pedro observes, in “picturing Wright,” that though he knew his marriage would preclude him from rejoining the Fellowship, he nonetheless prioritized making a visit to see FLW at Taliesin in Wisconsin. Pedro offered to be “on call to FLW for photo shoots as long as FLW desired him to do so. “For the following 14 years, I continued my association with Wright and he continued to occupy a place in my pantheon of heroes, a position he had to share with my father.” (“Picturing Wright” p.23) FLW, for his part, insisted on Pedro being his exclusive photographer except on occasion when FLW was away in China.

From NYC, Pedro became a free lance photographer in architecture for magazines like “Better Homes and Gardens,” “House and Home,” “Architectural Forum,” “Architectural Record,” “Vogue” and “Harper’s Bazaar.” He also served as photographer for architects Marcel Breuer, Eduard Durell Stone and FLW’s nemesis, Philip Johnson. Additionally he began photographing the sculptures and mobiles of Alexander Calder for the next 13 years and the work of Louise Nevelson for two years. But if FLW called, as all Pedro’s clients knew, Pedro dropped everything and went wherever FLW requested. (p. 24)

On one occasion in 1940 an incident occurred that suggested that subliminal antihispanic bias was still alive and well. Pedro had been called by FLW to photograph several houses in Wisconsin. One of the sites required him to drive quite a distance, FLW arranged for Pedro to use Wes Peter’s (one of the Fellowship members who was also married to FLW’s stepdaughter) new bright red Mercury convertible. Pedro was dressed in a crew-neck sweater, levis and brown, unpolished shoes.

The only money Pedro had with him was \$2.45, so FLW gave him a \$100 bill to pay for gas. Upon heading to one of the sites to be photographed, he stopped around dusk at a service station to refuel. Unable to find the light switch in the car with which he was unfamiliar, he asked the attendant to assist him. When asked by the attendant if the car was his, Pedro it was so new that hadn't driven it at night yet. Then when he went to pay for the gas which cost only \$3.00 (25 cents per gallon, at that time!!), he handed the attendant the \$100 bill. The attendant had to go to several other stores to find anyone who could cash the bill. Upon returning to the car, Pedro, getting nervous about being possibly late getting to the next photo shoot, asked the attendant for instructions using a "back road."

He had not gone too far before he was stopped by a cop who promptly arrested him for "speeding." He was not given a ticket: he was simply taken to jail. When asked for the registration to the car, he realized he did not have it. "Who owns the car?" he was asked. In his anxiety, he answered, "Frank Lloyd Wright." After spending the night in a cell, he was interrogated further in the morning. At that point he explained that he was hired to photograph a house designed by FLW which was currently under construction. The house was for a person named "Mr. Manson." The response of the several police officers participating in this questioning became quite consternated at that point. "Mr. Manson" happened to be their police commissioner! Pedro was immediately released into the custody of Commissioner Manson! ("Picturing Wright," p. 96)

This story was retold by Pedro to LCOC architect, Patrick Mahoney, who toured Pedro around on Pedro's visit to Buffalo in 2011. PHOTO 6

In an attempt to appear less Hispanic, Pedro preferred to be called "Peter." FLW and the members of the Fellowship complied. I was perusing a book by Roland Reisley about the FLW creation of a community near the Hudson River called "Usonia." and his experiences working with FLW on the design and building of the house. (Reisley, now in his 90's, still resides in the beautiful house and grills steaks for his friends on its patio. Patrick and I have been fortunate enough to be his guests!) Often Pedro accompanied FLW to Usonia. Many photos were taken. I found it interesting that Reisley refers to Pedro as "Peter" throughout the book.

But despite the acquiescence of FLW and the member of the Fellowship to Pedro's desire to be called Peter, FLW's wife, Ogilvanna, who harbored a clear dislike for Pedro, always called him 'Pedro' and took every opportunity she could to introduce him to others as "Pedro who is from Mexico," which, of course, he was not. ("Picturing Wright." P. 59) It made him feel uncomfortable with her, sensing nefarious bigotry.

PHOTO 7

In the early 1950's Pedro tried to overcome this tension. Knowing that Ogilvanna liked Mexican food, he asked his mother to make a Mexican lunch for the Wrights while the Wrights were in residence at Taliesin West. Afterwards, Pedro's mother wrote to him to tell him that the lunch had gone very well. Back in NYC, upon running into Ogilvanna, she brought up having had a nice lunch with Pedro's mother and said that she was charming. Ogilvanna then turned to leave the room, saying that it was too bad that none of his mother's charm had rubbed off on him. FLW, overhearing the comment, simply smiled in sympathy. ("Picturing Wright," p. 140) In fact, there were a number of times that Ogilvanna upbraided Pedro. On one occasion FLW chided her, saying, "Now, now, mother. Go easy on Pete. He's a good boy." (at p. 140)

After FLW's death in 1959, Ogilvanna never invited Pedro (nor other select Fellows) back to Taliesin. (p. 141)

That subliminal bias reflected in how people reacted to Pedro, haunted him for years. Even as a famous photographer in NYC and Connecticut, where he was often invited as a guest to black tie events to which he wore a tuxedo, he was repeatedly mistaken as a waiter, which necessitated his having to explain himself.

His obituary in the New York Times on Sept. 13, 2012 mentioned that in 1999, at the age of 82, Pedro decided to return to living in Arizona. At the time, he explained, "I felt compelled to come here in response to a silent call, a chorus of voices from the past...No matter how much I achieved, I always felt the need to explain just who I was and why I belonged." Returning to Arizona, he felt would free him to be himself. He resumed referring to himself as 'Pedro.'

The obituary quotes Pedro on the success of his return to Arizona. "Looking around me, aware that these people, this place and even the history I experienced so strongly more than 60 years ago, shaped me for the better – I feel a strong sense of peace. I no longer need to explain myself. I now realize that discrimination can have its positive

side, propelling a person to action when he might just sit around believing what others say about him. I know now who I am. And I know that I belong” (It is because of these words and Pedro’s acceptance of himself for what and who he is, that I have referred to him as Pedro throughout this article.

So, finally, to Pedro’s connection with Larkin. As one surveys his illustrious career, one could think it difficult to select Pedro’s favorite work, but to Pedro, his greatest photographic achievement came in 1953. An extraordinary exhibit, a retrospective of FLW’s architectural masterpieces, was held at the Guggenheim (itself a masterpiece of Wright designs.) It is described in Kathryn Smith’s book, referred to earlier. PHOTO 8

The exhibit included models and many photo murals, some by Pedro and others not. Two of these photo murals taken by another photographer, hanging at a right angle to each other, were of the Larkin Administration Building. Forming the third “wall” was a very large model of the San Francisco Call office building. They created essentially a three-sided alcove in one of the galleries. Pedro writes,

“Walking through the retrospective exhibitions, I came upon Mr. Wright having a tea break. It was a scene so perfect that it could not have been planned. There he was, with his pork-pie hat, stiff collar, and cane, sitting before a selection of his favorite architecture, the San Francisco Call Building model and photo murals of the Larkin Building in Buffalo.”

The Larkin Administration Building had tragically, been torn down in 1950. When one looks at that photo, one can only wonder what was going through the Master’s mind that day in 1953 as he quietly sipped his tea, oblivious to the fact that Pedro was there, about to take one of the most famous photos that exist of FLW. A copy of the photo hangs in the Seneca Street vestibule.

Though Pedro had never photographed nor even seen the Larkin Administration Building, when he visited Buffalo in 2011, there were two places he wanted to visit: the FLW designed Graycliff and the site of the LAB with its one remaining piece, a red brick fence pier on Swan Street. Patrick Mahoney was called upon to escort Pedro and his wife, Dixie, to see these sites on August 28, 2011.

When I talked to Mahoney about this experience, he recalled how delighted Pedro was to see his photos on the interpretive panel that a group of us, as volunteers, had had made many years ago in connection with our cleaning up the graffiti covered pier, removing some pretty nasty debris left by neighborhood kids inside the hollow pier (which was big enough to serve as some sort of a club house) and clear a triangular area along Swan Street to create a sort of pocket park where the panel was erected.

Pedro had not realized that there was this one piece of the LAB that survived till Mahoney, who had corresponded with him in 2003, told him about our stabilizing the pier and having the panel made. To have this famous photographer visit the site of the building which had been the subject of his most famous and his personal favorite photograph, of the Master lost in thought gazing at one of the Master's favorite designs, was a great tribute to FLW, to Pedro, to those of us who restored and memorialized it, and to the owners of LCOC who have embraced its significance and continue to maintain it. PHOTO 9

A year later Pedro Guerrero died on September 13, 2012 at the age of 95.