This Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece is back in bloom after a 20-year restoration. In a perfect world, you’d be able to visit.

By Philip Kennicott

May 12, 2020 at 8:00 a.m. EDT

BUFFALO — Last July, after almost 20 years of restoration and reconstruction, the stewards of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Martin House celebrated a milestone. Landscaping on the 1.5-acre estate in a suburban neighborhood of Buffalo was complete. It still looked raw and unformed, but the planting was done and now it was just a matter of waiting.

“They say the first year it sleeps, the second year it creeps, and the third year it leaps,” says Mary Roberts, executive director of the nonprofit that conserves one of the most important and ambitious building complexes Wright designed during his more than 70-year career.

The gardens, just emerging from the long, gray Buffalo winter, are creeping now. The bulbs — nearly 7,000 of them — are coming up, including the daffodils, narcissus and bluebells. There are buds visible on the new bushes, but the wisteria is still asleep.

And the house, a National Historic Landmark, is closed, like just about everything else because of the novel coronavirus. That’s particularly sad, says Roberts, because this was the year the Martin house was to emerge in its full glory.

“This was the first year when we could say, ‘Come, we are really ready for you,’ ” says Roberts. “We could welcome the world without any construction-related disruption, and we were staffed up, ready to roll; we had opened a cafe. Now, we are losing at least a quarter of our annual revenue.”
Until further notice, the house is empty, but for the twice-daily supervision of a caretaker. The light filtering through the nearly 400 art glass windows illuminates silent spaces, enclosed by walls of gold-flecked glazes on plaster and built-in cabinetry, and rooms full of Wright’s signature furniture, oak tables, barrel chairs and a princely dining room set that seems designed to encourage the family to eat its meals with the formal rigor of a game of chess.

I visited Martin House, and Graycliff, the summer estate of businessman Darwin D. Martin on the shores of Lake Erie, in December, when the winter light was stubborn and the cloud cover implacable. The two houses, commissioned by a family that offered Wright some of his most generous and enlightened patronage, are part of the remarkable legacy the architect left in this city. Martin, a self-made man who eventually rose to a top leadership role in the Larkin Co. (a major soap and mail-order enterprise), not only commissioned Wright to design his home, he brought Wright to town to design the Larkin Administration Building, a corporate headquarters, now demolished, that was among the most important projects Wright created. All that remains of the Larkin is a solitary brick pier, which has become a pilgrimage site for Wright admirers, testament to the enduring imaginative power of this innovative structure.
It rained much of the time I was in Buffalo, and the views at Graycliff, which is situated high on a cliff above the water, were circumscribed by a wall of mist over the lake. The temperature didn’t preclude walking through the Martin House living room doors, onto the sweeping porch covered by the low, elongated roof — but once outside, there was little to keep you there. Half of the great drama in a Wright home — the interplay of interior and exterior spaces — was on hiatus, making the sense of enclosure and warmth indoors all the more magnetic.

“He called it his domestic symphony,” says Roberts, of the main house’s flow of spaces, and its most distinctive element: a 175-foot-long view from the front door along a pergola to the conservatory at the far end of the property. It is as dramatic, and essential to understanding Wright’s large aesthetic, as any view at any Wright masterpiece, including the iconic waterfall vista at Fallingwater, the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum, and the facade and pools at the Imperial Hotel, preserved in part at an architectural park outside of Nagoya, Japan.
The sightline to the pergola terminates in a plaster reproduction of the Nike of Samothrace, a bit of visual hyperbole that makes you wonder and smile at Wright’s characteristic ability to finesse architectural drama just to the point of being bombastic. The house, like other Prairie houses of the period (Wright worked on the Martin House complex from 1903 to 1907), is entered through a door approached not head-on, but from the side, compelling a left turn that unveils the interior as a sudden flash of perception. From the moment you enter the house, the view toward Nike in the distance is dramatized by a crescendo of light, dim in the immediate foreground, brighter along the pergola and radiant — if the weather permits — in the glass-enclosed pergola that houses the white statue. The statue reproduction commands this domestic space as forcefully as the Hellenistic original commands the great staircase at the Louvre.

The length of the view, the impact of which Wright has done everything in his power to maximize, is disorienting. It cuts through domestic interiors with the force of a public thoroughfare, like a small town’s high street flanked by living and dining rooms and public reception space. And it dissolves the surrounding geography, which is basically suburban. The Martin House complex, which includes a gardener’s cottage, the Barton House (built for Darwin’s sister, Delta Martin Barton), the pergola, conservatory and a carriage house, make up nearly 30,000 square feet of built space, far larger than the surrounding homes in the neighborhood of ample but not grand lots laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted.
From the outside, the Martin House is impressive, but not overwhelming. Despite its vast volumes of interior space, it hugs the ground and keeps a low, contained profile. From the inside, however, it suggests the scale of a grand country estate. And that was Wright’s intent, which is played out as much in the urban design of the space as it is in the house itself. A few years before he designed the Martin House, Wright published designs in Ladies’ Home Journal, one of which imagined “A Home in a Prairie Town” that resembles the Martin House in several ways. The article also included an imaginary suburban block, in which four houses would occupy a green square divided into four rectangular plots, each with a house clustered at the center, looking out to the world oblivious to the proximity of its neighbors.

Wright didn’t have the luxury of designing the street plan when he created the Martin House, but he situated the house as near as possible to the ideal he suggested in his Ladies’ Home Journal map. The conservatory hugged the interior property line, with the pergola extending toward the street. A hemicycle of plantings enclosed the porch off the living room; the Barton House and the gardener’s house, added later, created a cross axis to the public vista centered on the Nike, such that the whole complex feels a bit like its own internal citadel.

The house is one of the great masterpieces of Wright’s architecture, and its two-decade return to glory is an inspiring story. Darwin Martin retired in 1925, and his family fell on hard times during the Depression. He died in 1935, and by 1937 the remaining family had abandoned the Martin House, which reverted to the city after taxes went unpaid. It sat vacant for nearly 20 years, and in 1962 the pergola, conservatory and carriage house were demolished, replaced with apartment buildings.
A nonprofit corporation, formed in 1992, began the long process of reassembling and restoring the property. The Barton House and gardener’s cottage were purchased, as were the old apartment buildings that were eventually removed. By 2007, the pergola, conservatory and carriage house were rebuilt. New systems were installed, roofs and gutters repaired, water damage mitigated, and historic interior elements repaired or reconstructed. The massive two-sided fireplace with its cut-glass wisteria mosaic was finally completed in 2017, after years of efforts to find craftsmen who could refashion its complicated floral design. By then, about $50 million had been spent on the project, with only the landscape remaining as the essential missing piece.

I had hoped to go back this spring, to see it in bloom, and I still hope to return before fall.

“Our hope is that we can reopen the house early this summer, and that we will continue to attract large numbers mostly from outside the region,” says Roberts.

Last year saw the best attendance the house has ever had, with about 42,000 visitors. This year, they are heading into the busy season — June through September — with no idea if there will be any admission revenue. Some staff members have been laid off, and at least one has contracted the virus. Hundreds of volunteers are sidelined as well. Educational efforts have moved online, but other sources of revenue, including rentals, are shut down.
Meanwhile, the house must be heated, its fire suppression system kept online and security maintained. Roberts and her staff are considering hypotheticals for the future. Will they reduce the size of tour groups? Will visitors be comfortable indoors, with strangers, in enclosed spaces? Will they receive money from the federal relief effort that includes grants to cover payroll expenses? Will that be enough?

“What do we expect, [in] the new reality?” she asks. “We are still just trying to get through it before we can figure what all the options are for the future.”

The Martin House is closed because of the coronavirus. For more information, including online resources, visit martinhouse.org.