Remembering Curtis Basinger

At the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, 29 April 2000
CURTIS BESINGER, architect and teacher, died in Lawrence, Kansas, on December 12, 1999, at the age of 85. He was that rare individual who combined skills of the architect, writer, musician, and inspired teacher. Born in Stanberry, Missouri, on June 12, 1914, he graduated from Stanberry High School in 1932 and earned a bachelor of science degree in architecture at the University of Kansas in 1936. At the University of Kansas he studied with Professor George M. Beal, an admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright and one of the enduring influences on Curtis's architectural career.

Upon graduation, Curtis spent three years in Kansas City working in architects' offices. Realizing that, as he wrote, “something was lacking in what I was learning,” and at the urging of Professor Beal, he joined Wright’s Taliesin Fellowship in 1939. As a Junior Apprentice he worked on construction projects, participated in musical programs, directed the chorus, and assisted in the drafting room. During World War Two, as a conscientious objector, Curtis spent three years working in federal reclamation, wildlife and forestry-service projects in the Midwest and West in lieu of military service.
Returning to Taliesin in 1946 as a Senior Apprentice, he worked on 37 projects, many of which were Usonian residences, the bread and butter of Wright’s second career.

After 16 years as a Taliesin Fellow, Curtis left the Fellowship in 1955, and embarked on three new careers at the age of 41. At the University he taught architecture for 29 years, attaining full professorship in 1965, and in 1984 became Professor Emeritus, still teaching the occasional course. In 1956-57 he was technical editor of the magazine *House Beautiful* and from 1957 to 1965 he was its architectural consultant. Over the course of 19 years he wrote 132 articles about various aspects of modern architecture, 97 of them for *House Beautiful*. In addition to his teaching and writing, for 31 years he had an architectural practice, part of the time in association with Fritz and Fabi Benedict in Aspen, Colorado.

Curtis gave generously of himself to his students and to the University, and he was an early champion of architectural preservation in the state of Kansas, serving on the state preservation board for many years. Beyond his teaching, his contributions to Frank Lloyd Wright’s work, and his own architectural practice, his most enduring legacy may well be the formation of the Frank Lloyd Wright Collection in the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, now one of the most important
repositories of Wright material in the country. The collection includes *House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon's impressive collection of photographs and books on Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, Professor George Beal's archives, and Curtis' collection of books, drawings, manuscripts, memorabilia, and photographs.

In 1995 Curtis published *Working with Mr. Wright: what it was like*, an attempt to answer forty years of questions from students and colleagues, rather than "just another biography of Mr. Wright." In the same year he was awarded the highest honor bestowed by the University of Kansas, the Distinguished Service Citation, in recognition of his "outstanding achievements and lifelong service to humanity."

PAMELA D. KINGSBURY

This remembrance of the life and work of Curtis Wray Besinger has been sponsored jointly by the KU School of Architecture and Urban Design & the University of Kansas Libraries