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Frank Lloyd Wright's Religious Architecture: Spaces for Communal Worship

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SAVEWRIGHT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT BUILDING CONSERVANCY

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IN THIS ISSUE

Wright's Religious Architecture

Guest Editor:
Scott W. Perkins

wright's religious architecture



ABOUT THE EDITOR

Scott W. Perkins is the Director of Preservation at Fallingwater. He was previously Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at Price Tower Arts Center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. His most recent work, *Building Bartlesville, 1945-2000* (2008) explores the post-WWII architectural impact of Wright, Bruce Goff and William Wesley Peters upon the community. Perkins has been a Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy board member since 2008 and chairs its Public Sites Committee.

During his now famous interview with television journalist Mike Wallace in 1957, Frank Lloyd Wright expounded his opinions of modern architecture, the cultural morality of the day and his views toward religion. Wallace pitched Wright a question that seemingly addressed all three areas: "What do you think of church architecture in the United States?" The answer he received, somewhat predictably, was "I think it's the cause of great shame."

Wright's interest in religious architecture is nearly genetic, a defining trait of his personality as the son of a minister and nephew of Jenkin Lloyd Jones, an early promoter of Unitarianism in the United States. Indeed, his autobiography even makes note of his mother having tacked engravings of English cathedrals to his nursery walls. Family connections also proved fruitful in his early career as Wright presumably assisted Joseph Lyman Silsbee with the interior on the Lloyd Jones family's Unity Chapel (1886) in Helena Valley near Spring Green, Wisconsin. Here and at his uncle Jenkin's All Souls Church (1885) in Chicago, he witnessed the familial aspects of congregations large and small, and understood the significance of gathering and worshiping in inspirational spaces.

Save for his domestic architecture, it is Frank Lloyd Wright's religious designs that perhaps span his career the longest. They vary in materials, spatial planning and ornament, and reflect a diversity of beliefs. This issue of *SaveWright* assembles a variety of approaches to appreciating his religious architecture, whether it is as a historian, architecture enthusiast or congregant. Joseph M. Siry discusses geometry, materiality and religious symbolism in Wright's designs for places of worship between 1905 and 1954. Dale Allen Gyure places two Florida Southern University chapels into the context of academic religious architecture as well as connecting them to the larger series of buildings by Wright for the campus. Mary Jane Hamilton's short history of the Unitarian Meeting House focuses especially on the domestic aspects of it, including the construction of custom hand-woven curtains by its members that graced the church for decades. Emily Cooperman chronicles the creation of Beth Sholom Synagogue's visitor center, a mix of interactive, video and didactic displays as well as a retail shop that successfully answers the challenge of interpreting it for its members as well as the public. Patrick J. Mahoney's collection of historic postcards, typically souvenirs of travel or shared experiences, now serve to recall an important subcategory of Wright's oeuvre in their depictions of his religious structures.

Wright changed our way of thinking about architecture and living, working, learning and worshiping within it. It is the authors' wish, and mine, that your next visit to the buildings featured on the following pages brings with it a greater appreciation for the inspiration his designs have provided us.

Scott W. Perkins
Guest Editor

Cover photo: Beth Sholom Synagogue (1953) in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Photo by Emily Cooperman
Any images not credited are from the Conservancy's collection.

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The mission of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy is to facilitate the preservation and maintenance of the remaining structures designed by Frank Lloyd Wright through education, advocacy and technical services.

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SAVEWRIGHT

addressing the issues

Yes, there are many organizations containing the name Frank Lloyd Wright in their titles, and yes, determining the function of those within that pantheon may pose difficulties. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy is the only entity to contain “Building Conservancy” within its descriptor and, significantly, it is the only entity to focus exclusively on the conservation of Wright’s built works.

“Conservation” must demand a broader focus, including a consideration of the architectural merit of the structures being conserved, their historical and present context, and the methods appropriate to their restoration and upkeep, now and in the future. Further, “conservation,” as we all recognize, must have a political focus, as development and other economic pressures challenge the architectural status quo as it relates to Wright.

These are the issues that the Conservancy, its staff, its board and its membership have addressed through lectures, architectural tours and conferences at Wright-rich sites, publications, technical advice, and both advocacy for and assistance in the preservation of endangered structures.

In many respects, the Conservancy’s *Save Wright* magazine, issued for the first time in its present form in the spring of 2010, exemplifies and expands upon the Conservancy’s multifaceted conservation mission. In that regard, I note the recognition of the significance of Wright as reflected the very first *Save Wright* issue, “The Making of a World Heritage Nomination,” an issue that focused on the rationale for and process involved in the Conservancy-generated nomination of 10 of Wright’s buildings as UNESCO World Heritage Sites (a process that remains ongoing). I note, as well, issues devoted to advice to homeowners, energy efficiency, landscaping solutions, information regarding



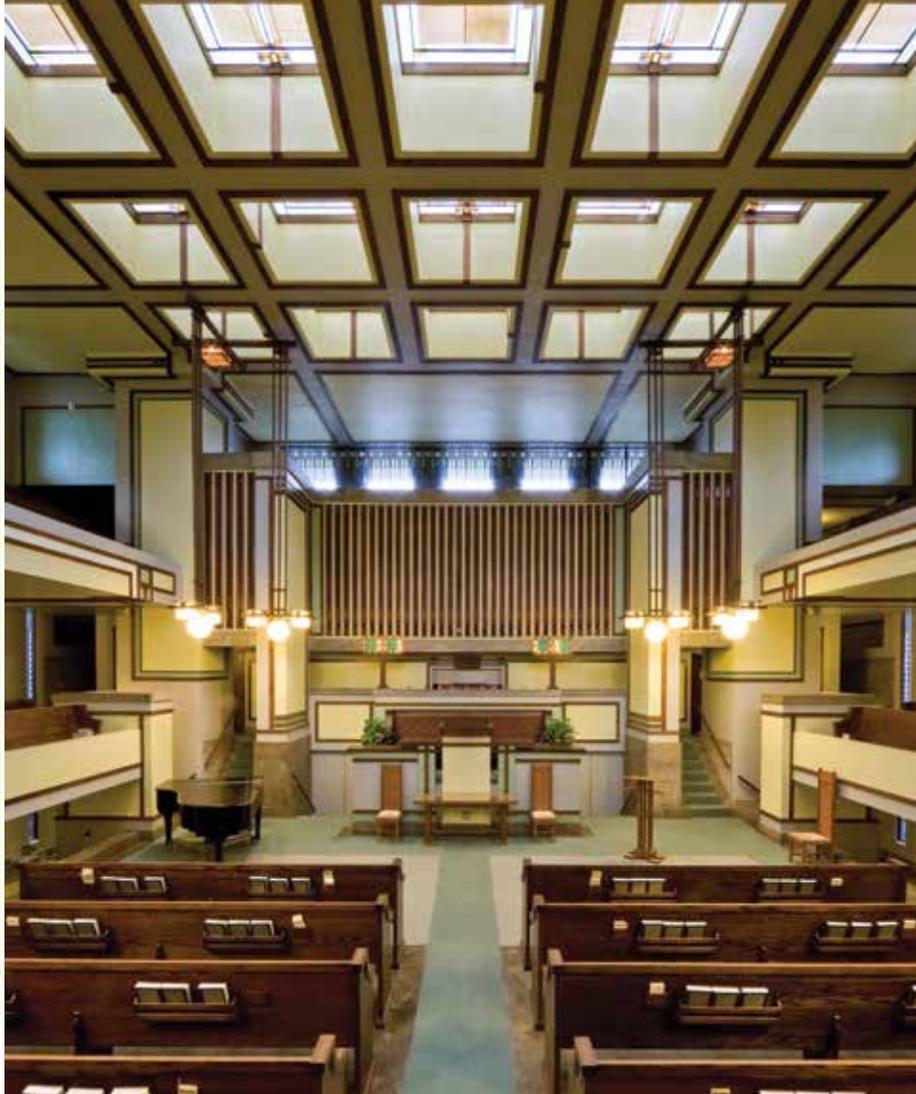
overnight venues, the Conservancy’s role as a preservation advocate, and details of Wright structures, both in the United States and Japan.

The present issue’s focus on Wright’s religious architecture furthers our understanding of a unique class of Wright’s buildings and the evolution of his ideas on the proper relationship between architecture and worship in the varied religious contexts with which he was presented. As you will discover, several of the articles in this issue focus on particular structures, whereas another provides an overall analysis of Wright’s religious work, and a final article approaches his religious architecture from a postcard perspective. All demonstrate the unique architectural merit of Wright’s designs and provide a further perspective on the essential nature of the Conservancy’s mission.

Edith Payne
President
Frank Lloyd Wright
Building Conservancy
Owner, Richardson House



Unity Temple (1905) in Oak Park, Illinois.



Unity Temple auditorium facing south.

Frank Lloyd Wright's Religious Architecture: Spaces for Communal Worship

BY JOSEPH M. SIRY

Although created for varied institutional clients and in different settings, Frank Lloyd Wright's religious auditoriums share a common concern for mutual visibility and audibility to enhance the communal nature of worship.

Joseph Siry is the author of *Unity Temple: Frank Lloyd Wright and Architecture for Liberal Religion* (Cambridge, 1996) and *Beth Shalom Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright and Modern Religious Architecture* (Chicago, 2012). He was the recipient of a Wright Spirit Award in 2015.

He was also attentive to the symbolic or figurative character of each of these projects, which were iconographically legible forms that represented their clients' particular denominational cultures. In his autobiography, Wright wrote, "My religion so far as it went was Unitarian," and he claimed to descend from Unitarian ministers on both his father's and mother's sides.

The earliest works of religious architecture with which Wright was involved were the Unity Chapel (1885-86) for his extended maternal Lloyd Jones family and its neighbors in their valley south of Spring Green, Wisconsin, and All Souls Church (1885-86), for his uncle the Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones in the Oakwood district on Chicago's South Side.

After starting his practice, Wright's first commission for a major public hall was the project that became the Abraham Lincoln Center (1897-1905), which was to succeed his uncle's neighboring All Souls Church. Its nearly square auditorium with rising tiers of seats around three sides of both a main level and upper balcony, facing the frontal platform and podium, directly influenced his design for the new Unitarian Universalist church in Oak Park, Unity Temple, on which Wright began work in the summer of 1905. Unlike basilican churches, Unity Temple has a cubic auditorium only 35 feet wide between balcony fronts. This room seats 450 in pews on the central floor, and in lower and upper balconies around three sides, all within intimate range of the frontal central pulpit and the organ screen behind. Wright called the building "a modern meeting-house," and he designed clerestory windows on all four sides of a worship room, wherein everyone can see and hear each other while focused on the pulpit and choir.

In presenting Wright's design to Oak Park, where mediievally styled churches of other Protestant denominations were the norm, Unity Temple's minister asserted, "Without tower or spire it expresses the spirit of the ideal. By its form it expresses the thought, inherent in the liberal faith, that God should not be sought in the sky but on earth among the children of men." In the spirit of Unitarian appreciation for world religions, Unity Temple's concrete exterior alluded to non-Western temples, including Japanese and Mayan works known to Wright. Its minister wrote: "Informed by the same spirit which characterized the ancient temples, this structure typifies the thought 'while religions are many, religion is one.' ... The past and the present forms of religion are thus brought together in a spirit of unity." As in later religious structures, Wright here chose a distinct geometric figure. In Unity Temple, this is the square developed as the cube, whose 1:1:1 ratio of dimensions signified the Unitarian ideal of unity, as did the building's novel monolithic construction in reinforced concrete exposed inside and out.



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Annie M. Pfeiffer Chapel interior looking northwest, showing the flat ceiling skylight inside the northwest structural column, and cantilevers supporting lantern walls and the western bow-tie end, as rebuilt after a 1944 hurricane and after the remodeling of seating completed in 1967.

"By its form it expresses the thought, inherent in the liberal faith, that God should not be sought in the sky but on earth among the children of men," asserted Unity Temple's minister.

Wright's religious architecture was related to his designs for theaters. His view of the modern theater as a temple for culturally elevated drama shaped his later unbuilt projects for Woodstock, New York (1931-32), and Hartford, Connecticut (1948-49), as well as his built Kalita Humphreys Theater for the Dallas Theater Center (1955-59). In these, he developed a plan

“All forms of religion have a basic desire to function in harmony with their beliefs and I try to help them—to materialize their ideas in something beautiful for all humanity,” said Wright.

for seating based on what he called the reflex angle, meaning groups of seats arranged at 30-degree angles around a frontal stage projecting into the audience. Wright used this reflex angle plan in the Annie M. Pfeiffer Chapel for Florida Southern College in Lakeland (1938-41) and the Community Church in Kansas City, Missouri (1939-42). The first, built as both auditorium and chapel for President Ludd Spivey’s liberal Methodist college, had a compact plan of reflex angles on a main floor and balcony. [See Dale Allen Gyure’s article on p. 18 for more on Pfeiffer Chapel.]

The democratic ideal informed the Reverend Burris Jenkins’ Community Church, which had broken with the liberal Disciples of Christ to adopt an open membership policy and become the largest Protestant congregation in Kansas City, with 4,200 members.

When its building burned in 1939, Wright was asked to design a new auditorium that could function as a theater or cinema as well as a sanctuary, since the church aspired to be “the social center for the masses.” This design also included the reflex-angle seating. Dedicated in January 1942, the Community Church, with its exterior cantilevered balconies, looked modernistic and non-sectarian, conveying Jenkins’ ideal of “the church of the future.”

Conveying a democratic ideal through geometry was central to Wright’s building for the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin, (1946-52). As a “country church,” in the tradition of Unity Chapel, this building marked its congregation’s relocation to a then-rural site looking across fields to Lake Mendota. As the minister wrote to Wright: “We conceive the core to be one large room which will be usable for all the functions of a parish calling for a large assembly room. That is this room will be adaptable for worship, lectures, forums, recreation, dinners, movies, recitals, dramatics.” Wright shaped a concise triangular room that could be rearranged in front of its stone pulpit below the organ and choir loft. The space embodied his ideal of democratic character in church architecture.

Another line of inquiry among Wright’s worship rooms was his unbuilt Steel Cathedral of 1926-27 for New York City and its adaptation in his Beth Shalom Synagogue of 1953-59, in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania,



Conveying a democratic ideal through geometry was central to Wright’s building for the First Unitarian Society of Madison.



First Unitarian Society of Madison, interior view looking north toward pulpit showing plastered ceiling beneath underside of roof trusses, photographed in 1991.