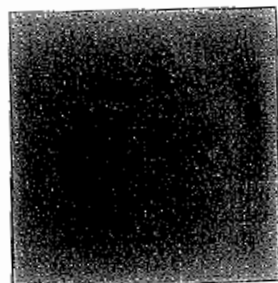


FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY



Excerpt , pp 153-160.

LET us take Unity Temple to pieces in the thought of its architect and see how it came to be the Unity Temple you now see.

DESIGNING UNITY TEMPLE

HAD Doctor Johonnot, the Universalist pastor of Unity Church, been Fra Junipero the style of Unity Temple would have been predetermined—"Mission." Had he been Father Latour it would have been Midi-Romanesque. Yes, and perhaps being what he was, he was entitled to the only tradition he knew—that of the little white New England church, lean spire pointing to heaven—"back East." If sentimentality were sense this might be so.

But the pastor was out of luck. Circumstances brought him to yield himself up in the cause of architecture. And to that cause everyone who undertakes to read what follows is called upon to yield a little.

OUR building committee were all good men and true. One of them, Charles E. Roberts, the mechanical engineer and inventor I have mentioned, was himself enlightened in creation. One, enlightened, is leaven enough in any Usonian committee lump. The struggle began. It is always a struggle in architecture for the architect where good men and true are concerned.

First came the philosophy of the building in my own mind.

I said, let us abolish, in the art and craft of architecture, literature in any symbolic form whatsoever. The sense of inner rhythm deep planted in human sensibility lives far above all other considerations in art. Then why the steeple of the little white church? Why *point* to heaven?

I told the committee a story. Did they not know the tale of the holy man who, yearning to see God, climbed up and up the highest mountain—climbed to the highest relic of a tree there was on the mountain? There, ragged and worn, he lifted up his eager perspiring face to heaven and called upon God. He heard a voice bidding him get down . . . go back!

Would he really see God's face? Then he should go back, go down there in the valley below where his own people were—there only could *he* look upon God's countenance. . . .

Why not, then, build a temple, not to God in that way—more sentimental than sense—but build a temple to man, appropriate to his uses as a meeting place, in which to study man himself for his God's sake? A modern meeting-house and a good-time place.

The pastor was a liberal. His liberality was thus challenged, his reason was piqued and the curiosity of all was aroused. What would such a building look like? They said they could imagine no such thing.

"That's what you came to me for," I ventured. "I can imagine it and I will help you create it." Promising the building committee something tangible to look at soon—I sent them away.

The first idea was to keep a noble room for worship in mind, and let that sense of the great room shape the whole edifice. Let the room inside be the architecture outside.

What shape? Well, the answer lay in the material. There was only one material to choose—as the church funds were \$45,000—to "church" 400 people in 1906. Concrete was cheap.

Why not make the wooden boxes or forms so the concrete could be cast in them as separate blocks and masses, these grouped about an interior space in some such way as to preserve this sense of the interior space, the great room, in the appearance of the whole building? And the block-masses might be left as themselves with no facing at all? That would be cheap and permanent and not ugly either.

What roof? What had concrete to offer as a cover shelter? The concrete slab—of course. The reinforced slab. Nothing else if the building was to be thoroughbred, meaning built in character out of one material.

Too monumental, all this? Too forthright for my committee I feared. Would a statement so positive as that final slab over the whole seem irreligious to them? Profane in their eyes? Why? But the flat slab was cheap and direct. It would be nobly simple. The wooden forms or molds in which concrete buildings must at that time be cast were always the chief item of expense, so to repeat the use of a single form as often as possible was necessary. Therefore a building, all four sides alike, looked like the thing. This, reduced to simplest terms, meant a building square in plan. That would make their temple a cube—a noble form in masonry.

The slab, too, belonged to the cube by nature. "*Credo simplicitatem.*" That form is most imaginative and happy that is most radiant with the aura or overtone of super-form. Integrity.

Then the Temple itself—still in my mind—began to take shape. The site was noisy, by the Lake Street car-tracks. Therefore it seemed best to keep the building closed on the three

front sides and enter it from a court to the rear at the center of the lot. Unity Temple itself with the thoughts in mind I have just expressed, arrived easily enough, but there was a secular side to Universalist church activities—entertainment often, Sunday school, feasts, and so on.

To embody these with the temple would spoil the simplicity of the room—the noble Room in the service of man for the worship of God. So I finally put the secular space designated as "Unity House," a long free space to the rear of the lot, as a separate building to be subdivided by movable screens for Sunday school or on occasion. It thus became a separate building but harmonious with the Temple—the entrance to both to be the connecting link between them. That was that.

And why not put the pulpit at the entrance side at the rear of the square Temple, and bring the congregation into the room at the sides on a lower level so those entering would be imperceptible to the audience? This would preserve the quiet and the dignity of the room itself. Out of that thought came the depressed foyer or cloister corridor on either side, leading from the main lobby at the center to the stairs in the near and far corners of the room. Those entering the room in this way could see into the big room but not be seen by those already seated within it.

And, important to the pastor, when the congregation rose to disperse, here was opportunity to move forward toward their pastor and by swinging wide doors open beside the pulpit allow the entire flock to pass out by him and find themselves directly in the entrance loggia from which they had first come in. They had gone into the depressed entrances at the sides from this same entrance to the big room. But it seemed more respectful to let them go out thus toward the pulpit than turn their backs upon their minister as is usual in most churches.

So this was done.

The room itself—size determined by comfortable seats with leg-room for four hundred people—was built with four interior free standing posts to carry the overhead structure. These concrete posts were hollow and became free-standing ducts to insure economic and uniform distribution of heat. The large supporting posts were so set in plan as to form a double tier of alcoves on four sides of the room. I flooded these side-alcoves with light from above to get a sense of a happy cloudless day into the room. And with this feeling for light the center ceiling between the four great posts became skylight, daylight sifting through between the intersecting concrete beams, filtering through amber glass ceiling lights. Thus managed the light would, rain or shine, have the warmth of sunlight. Artificial lighting took place there at night as well. This scheme of lighting was integral, gave diffusion and kept the room-space clear.

Now for proportion—for the concrete expression of concrete in this natural arrangement—the ideal of an organic whole well in mind. And we have arrived at the question of *style*. For observe, so far, what has actually taken place is only reasoned *arrangement*. The “plan” with an eye to an exterior in the realm of ideas but meantime “felt” in *imagination* as a whole.

First came the general philosophy of the thing as repeated in the little story to the trustees. All artistic creation has its own philosophy. It is the first condition of creation. However, some would smile and say, “the result of it.”

Second there was the general purpose of the whole to consider in each part: a matter of reasoned arrangement. This arrangement must be made with a sense of the yet-unborn-whole in the mind, to be blocked out as appropriate to concrete masses cast in wooden boxes. Holding all this diversity together in a preconceived direction is really no light matter but is the condition of creation. Imagination conceives here the PLAN suitable to the material and the purpose of the whole, seeing the probable possible form clearer all the time.

Imagination reigns supreme, until now the form the whole will naturally take must be seen.

But if all this preliminary planning has been well conceived that question in the main is settled. This matter of style is organic now.

We do not choose the style. No. Style is what is coming now and it will be what we *are* in all this. A thrilling moment in any architect's experience. He is about to see the countenance of something he is invoking with intense concentration. Out of this inner sense of order and love of the beauty of life something is to be born—maybe to live long as a message of hope and be a joy or a curse to his kind. *His* message he feels. None the less will it be “theirs,” and rather more. And it is out of love and understanding that any building is born to bless or curse those it is built to serve. Bless them if they will see, understand and aid. Curse them as it will be cursed by them if either they or the architect fail to understand each other. This is the faith and the fear in the architect as he makes ready—to draw his design.

In all artists it is somewhat the same fear and the same faith.

NOW regard this pure white sheet of paper! It is ready for recording the logic of the plan.

T-square, triangle, scale—seductive invitation lying upon the spotless surface. Temptation!

"Boy! Go tell Black Kelly to make a blaze there in the work-room fireplace! Ask Brown Sadie if it's too late to have Baked Bermudas for supper! Then go ask your Mother—I shall hear her in here—to play something—Bach preferred, or Beethoven if she prefers."

Now comes to brood—to suffer doubt, hesitate yet burn with eagerness. To test bearings—and prove ground already assumed by putting all together in definite scale on paper. Preferably small scale study at first. Then larger. Finally still larger scale detail studies of parts.

AN aid to creative effort, the open fire. What a friend to the laboring artist the poetic baked-onion! Real encouragement to him is great music. Yes, and what a poor creature, after all, creation comes singing through. About like catgut and horseshair in the hands of a Sarasate.

Night labor at the draughting board is best for intense creation. It may continue uninterrupted.

Meantime glancing side reflections are passing in the mind—"design is abstraction of nature-elements in purely geometric terms"—that is what we ought to call pure design? . . . This cube—this square—proportion. But—nature-pattern and nature-texture in materials themselves often approach conventionalization, or the abstract, to such a degree as to be superlative means ready to the designer's hand to qualify, stimulate, and enrich his own efforts . . . What texture this concrete mass? Why not its own gravel? How to bring the gravel clean on the surface? . . . I knew. Here was reality. Yes, the "fine thing" is always reality. Always reality? . . . Realism, the subgeometric, however, is the abuse of this fine feeling. . . . Keep the straight lines clean and keep all significant of the idea—the flat plane expressive and always clean cut. But let texture come into them to qualify them in sunlight.

Reality is spirit—the essence brooding just behind all aspect. Seize it! And—after all you will see that the pattern of reality is supergeometric, casting a spell or a charm over any geometry, and is such a spell in itself.

Yes, so it seems to me as I draw with T-square, triangle and scale. That is what it means to be an artist—to seize this essence brooding everywhere in everything, just behind aspect. These questionings arising each with its own train of thought by the way, as the architect sits at his work.

Suddenly it is morning. To bed for a while.

BUT returning to the drawing board, here we see penciled upon a sheet of paper, the plan, section, and elevation in the main—all except the exterior of Unity House, as the room for secular recreation is to be called. To establish harmony between these buildings of separate function proved difficult, utterly exasperating.

Another series of concentrations—lasting hours at a time for several days. How to keep the noble scale of the temple in the design of the subordinate mass of the secular hall and not falsify the function of that secular mass? The ideal of an organic architecture is often terribly severe discipline for the imagination. I came to know that full well. And, always, some minor concordance takes more time, taxes concentration more than all besides. Any minor element may become a major problem to vex the architect. How many schemes I have thrown away because some one minor feature would not come true to form!

Thirty-four studies were necessary to arrive at this concordance as it is now seen. Unfortunately the studies are lost with thousands of others of many other buildings: the fruit of similar struggles to co-ordinate and perfect them as organic entities—I wish I had kept them. Unity House looks easy enough now, for it is right enough. But it was not.

Finally, see the sense of the room not only preserved—it *may be seen as the soul of the design*. Instead of being built into the heart of a block of sculptured building material, out of sight, the sacrosanct space for worship is merely screened in . . . does it come through as the living “motif” of the architecture?

Many studies in detail as a matter of course yet remain to be made, in order to determine what further may be left out to protect the design. These studies never seem to end and in this sense no organic building may ever be “finished.” The complete goal of the ideal of organic architecture is never reached. Nor need be. What worth-while ideal is ever reached?

Unity Temple is a complete building on paper, already. There is no “sketch” and there never has been one. There seldom is in a thought-built building.

The hardest of an architect’s trials is to show his work for the first time to anyone not entirely competent or perhaps unsympathetic.

Already the architect begins to fear for the fate of his design. If it is to be changed much he prefers to throw it all away and begin all over again. Not much hope in the committee except Mr. Roberts. Why not ask him to see the design and explain it to him first? This is done. He is delighted. He *understands!* He is himself an inventor. And every project in architecture needs this one intimate friend in order to proceed. Mr. Roberts suggests a model. Without it nothing can be done. So the model is soon made.

All right; let the committee come now. They do come—all curious. Soon confounded—taking the “show me” attitude. At this moment the creative architect is distinctly at a dis-

advantage as compared with his obsequious brother of the "styles," he who can show his pattern-book, speak glibly of St. Mark's at Venice or Capella Palatine, impress the no less craven clients by brave show of erudite authorities.

But the architect with the ideal of an organic architecture at stake can talk only principle and sense. His only appeal is fresh and must be made to the independent thought and judgment of his client such as it is. The client, too, must know how to think a little or follow from generals to particulars. How rare it is for an architect to go into any court where that quality of mind is on the bench! This architect has learned to dread the personal idiosyncrasy—offered him three times out of five—as a substitute for the needed, hoped-for intelligence.

But hoping, we try. And we use all our resources, we two—the inventor and I—and we win a third member of the committee at the first meeting. Including the pastor, there are now four only left in doubt. One of the four openly hostile—Mr. Skillin. Dr. Johonnot, the pastor, is himself impressed but cautious—oh very—but tactful. He really has a glimpse of a new world. There is hope, distinctly hope, when he makes four as he soon does and the balance of power is with us. We need three more but the architect's work is done now. The four will get the others. The pastor is convinced. He will work! Doubts and fears are finally put to sleep—all but Mr. Skillin's. Mr. Skillin is sure the room will be dark—sure the acoustics will be bad. Finally the commission to go ahead is formally given over his dissent and warnings. Usually there is a Mr. Skillin on every modern building project in Usonia.

Now, who will build the Temple? After weeks of prospecting, no one can be found who wants to try it. Simple enough—yes—that's the trouble. So simple there is nothing at all to gauge it by. Requires too much imagination and initiative to be safe. The only bids available came in double, or more, our utmost limit. No one really wanted to touch it. Contractors are naturally gamblers but they usually bet on a sure thing—as they see the thing.

Now Paul Mueller comes to the rescue, reads the scheme like easy print. Will build it for only a little over their appropriation—and does it. He takes it easily along for nearly a year but he does it. Doesn't lose much on it in the end. It is exciting to him to rescue ideas, to participate in creation. And together we overcame difficulty after difficulty in the field, where an architect's education is never finished.

This building, however, is finished and the Sunday for dedication arrives.

I do not want to go. Stay at home.

When the church was opened the phone began to ring. Happy contented voices are heard in congratulation. Finally weary, I take little Francie by the hand to go out into the air to get away from it all. Enough.

But just as my hat goes on my head, another ring, a prosaic voice, Mr. Skillin's: "Take back all I said. . . . Light everywhere—all pleased."

"Hear well?"

"Yes, see and hear fine—see it all now."

"I'm glad."

"Goodbye." At last the doubting member, sincere in praise, a good sport besides.

Francie got tossed in the air. She came down with a squeal of delight.

And that is how it was and is and will be as often as a building is born.

Now, even though you are interested in architecture this story is more or less tedious and partly meaningless to you, as you were fairly warned at the beginning it would be. Without close study of the plans and photographs as it is read it must bore you. I have undertaken here, for once, to indicate the process of building on principle to insure character and achieve style, as near as I can indicate it by taking Unity Temple to pieces. Perhaps I am not the one to try it. It really would be a literary feat and feast were it well done.

A CODE

CONCERNING the traditional church as a modern building! Religion and art are forms of inner-experience—growing richer and deeper as the race grows older. We will never lose either. But I believe religious experience is outgrowing the church—not outgrowing religion but outgrowing the church as an institution, just as architecture has outgrown the Renaissance and for reasons human, scientific and similar. I cannot see the ancient institutional form of any church building as anything but sentimental survival for burial. The Temple as a forum and good-time place—beautiful and inspiring as such—yes. As a religious edifice raised in the sense of the old ritual? No. I cannot see it at all as living. It is no longer free.

OF course what is most vitally important in all that I have tried to say and explain cannot be explained at all. It need not be, I think. But here in this searching process may be seen the architect's mind at work, as boys in the studio would crowd around and participate in it. And you too, perhaps, may see certain wheels go around.

Certain hints coming through between the lines that may help someone who needs help in comprehending what planning a building really means.