

# UNITY TEMPLE



Frank Lloyd Wright and  
Architecture for Liberal Religion

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## Introduction

From: UNITY TEMPLE: FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT  
AND ARCHITECTURE FOR LIBERAL RELIGION

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UNITY Temple, which houses the Unitarian Universalist Church in Oak Park, Illinois, is among Frank Lloyd Wright's most renowned works of architecture. Its auditorium is one of the most distinctive rooms for worship in the United States, and architects from all over the world visit the building every year. Admired since its completion in 1909, Unity Temple's innovative form has made it a canonical work in the international history of modern architecture. This book analyzes the building both as a model of Wright's art and as a symbol of the liberal religious culture that the structure was to serve and signify. From these perspectives Unity Temple marks the intersection of Wright's philosophic and aesthetic agenda as an artist with those Unitarian and Universalist traditions of belief that his forms were meant to house and convey. Wright himself was raised in a liberal Unitarian spiritual and intellectual environment. Thus his creation of Unity Temple engaged his powers of synthesis and invention as an architect in the service of convictions and ideas that he had known from childhood. For these reasons, a historical account of this building must have a depth of facility in its treatment not only of the architecture, but also of the cultural context from which Unity Temple emerged and which its memorable form helped define, for both its creators and its audiences. In this way, the story of the building's creation connects both to Wright's other works in the period and to other narratives of regional and national liberal religion and its architectures around 1900. Unity Temple thus provides a point of entry into broader questions whose study enriches understanding of this singular work.<sup>1</sup>

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Today a contemporary visitor encounters Unity Temple in an immediate context that is partially transformed from that at the time of the building's

## Unity Temple

FIGURE 1

Unity Temple, showing west front along Kenilworth Avenue, Oak Park, Ill., 1906–9. Frank Lloyd Wright, architect. Reprinted from *Ausgeführte Bauten von Frank Lloyd Wright* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1911). © by Ernst Wasmuth Verlag GmbH & Co., Tübingen.

completion in 1909. The structure stands on the southeast corner of east–west Lake Street, Oak Park’s axial main street, and north–south Kenilworth Avenue. Figure 1 shows the building’s western flank along Kenilworth Avenue in 1909. At the time the suburban village of Oak Park was a community of about 18,000 residents, connected by streetcar and elevated railway to Chicago eight miles to the east. On Lake Street only the central roadway was paved for the streetcar line that ran at grade in front of Wright’s site. Frame houses on ample lots flanked Wright’s building to the east and west on the south side of Lake Street, as shown in a map from 1908 (see Fig. 58). One frame house stood on the southwest corner of the intersection across Kenilworth, where Oak Park’s new post office was built in 1933. In 1909 nearby along Lake Street there were several larger mansions, including one on the northwest corner of Kenilworth owned by Edwin O. Gale, a prominent member of Unity Church who also owned the site on which Unity Temple would be built. Before the land was sold to Unity Church, the site was considered a prime location for Oak Park’s village hall, in part because the land sloped down in three different directions.<sup>2</sup>

In 1909 the context for Wright’s building was not only residential but institutional. North across Lake Street was the spired First Congregational Church, rebuilt after a fire of 1916; the structure can be seen there today

with a lawn to its west owned by the church. East of this church building was the original Scoville Institute, where the Oak Park Public Library now stands. Farther west on Lake Street stood the Grace Episcopal Church and the First Presbyterian Church, both of which still exist. These were the village’s newest ecclesiastical structures when Wright designed Unity Temple, whose innovative forms were intended in part to stand in symbolic contrast to these neomedieval monuments.

Looking at Unity Temple from across Lake Street, one is confronted by the looming volume of Wright’s auditorium – a room apprehensible but not directly accessible from outside. Walls of concrete, refaced for a second time in 1973–74, are unbroken above the two-stepped base as a visual and literal foundation that continues below ground. Atop the walls the auditorium’s interior skylights are seen through clerestory windows screened by ornamental concrete columns beneath roofs shaped as slabs of concrete that cantilever 5 ft. beyond these columns. The instepped base of the wall below serves to accentuate by contrast the projection of the slabs above. Entry is not immediately visible, yet straight, level paths lead past the high, flanking walls to exterior steps set back from Unity Temple’s front on its east and west sides. These steps, abutted by squared flower boxes of cast concrete, lead to the building’s east and west entrance terraces.

Unity Temple’s system of access is unusual for a church and was questioned when it was built. To approximate the convention of a front door, one observer recommended that the side walls to Unity Temple’s west terrace be removed and that a flight of steps lead directly up to this terrace from Kenilworth Avenue. However, another local resident claimed that Unity Temple’s chief attraction lay in its uniqueness: “Seeing it, one is curious. An open entrance tends to dispel curiosity. Much of the charm vanishes. But now one wonders what mysteries lie behind the wall. The fascination of the alluring days, when we reveled in fairy tales, returns. Our wondering selves are fairly drawn to the place beyond the wall. We are embarked on an adventure. And it impels us, sooner or later, to discover the coziness within. The mystery alone is enough to charm and win.”<sup>3</sup>

Once on an entrance terrace, one is standing 60 ft. back from Lake Street, sheltered by the mass of Unity Temple and, across the rear of the site, the wider building of Unity House (used for social events and Sunday school). Above the doors to the foyer between Unity Temple and Unity House are words in bronze letters, designed by Wright, which convey the Unitarian ideal: “For the Worship of God and the Service of Man” (Fig. 2). Below, six doors with ornamental panels of clear glass framed in oak lead to the foyer. This room’s 27-ft. width contrasts with its 9-ft. height to create a laterally expansive space. The carpet is set in a depression in the floor, sustaining its horizontal continuity. Surfaces are muted gray and yellow. On the south, through a clear panel of plate glass with flanking doors, one sees the skylit Unity House and its broad central fireplace (Fig. 3).

Inside Unity House, four hollow concrete columns denote its central

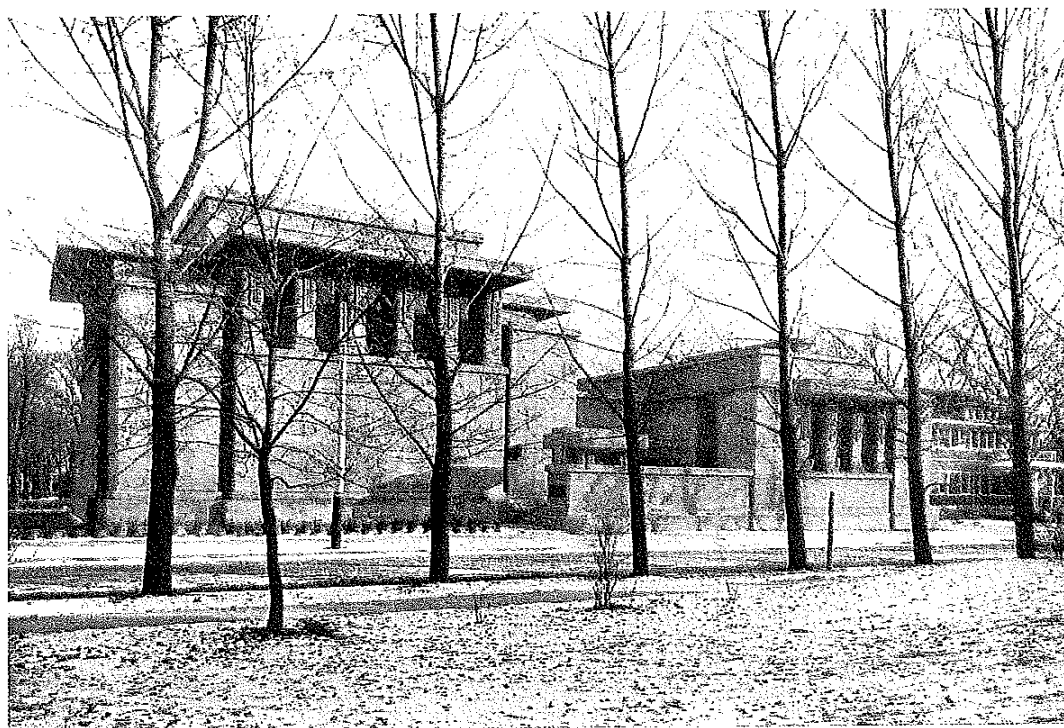






FIGURE 2

Wright, Unity Temple, west entrance terrace (Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, Photograph No. 0611.0019. © The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation).

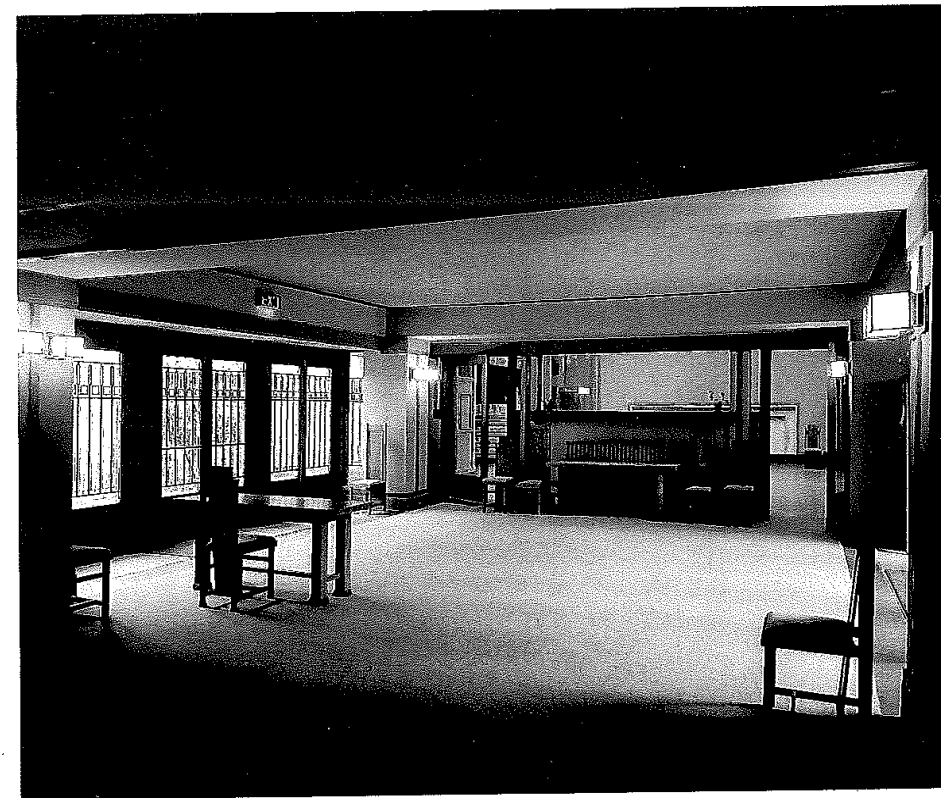
volume of space flanked by balconies on the east and west (Fig. 4). Wright once envisioned inscriptions on these balconies, for which he designed folding screens of art glass that would partition them from the central space. The areas on the east and west sides of Unity House, on both the balcony level and the main floor, were to be used as Sunday school classrooms lit by continuous horizontal window bands. Wright had at first envisioned a mural over the fireplace on the south wall of this room. The capacious kitchen behind the south wall was designed to accommodate church suppers in this room (Fig. 5). In 1908 Wright organized one of the first events in this

room, an evening gathering of Chicago's leading artists. If one turns to Unity House's north wall, stairs on either side rise behind the northern columns to the balconies (Fig. 6). Overhead, art glass windows of the pastor's study open into Unity House's central space. Above the concrete floors, the room's walls and ceilings are divided into fields of colored plaster by bands of oak, now stripped but originally stained a dark brown to complement yellow, green, and brown tones of the plaster and those of the art glass in the seven bays of the ceiling's skylight. Unseen above the ceiling plane are deep trusses that span the length and breadth of the room.

To enter the auditorium, one was originally meant to go through other interior doors that face west (left) or east (right) off the foyer's north side into spaces that Wright termed cloisters. Their floor is level with the foyer's. From these low, dark passages along the east and west sides of the auditorium, one was to mount the steps in the corners of the auditorium either to its main floor or to seating in its two levels of galleries (Fig. 7). Entry into the room for worship was thus elaborately indirect. As in many of Wright's residential designs of the period, in Unity Temple one ascends from a darker

FIGURE 3

Wright, Unity Temple, entrance foyer, interior looking southeast. Photograph by Thomas A. Heinz.



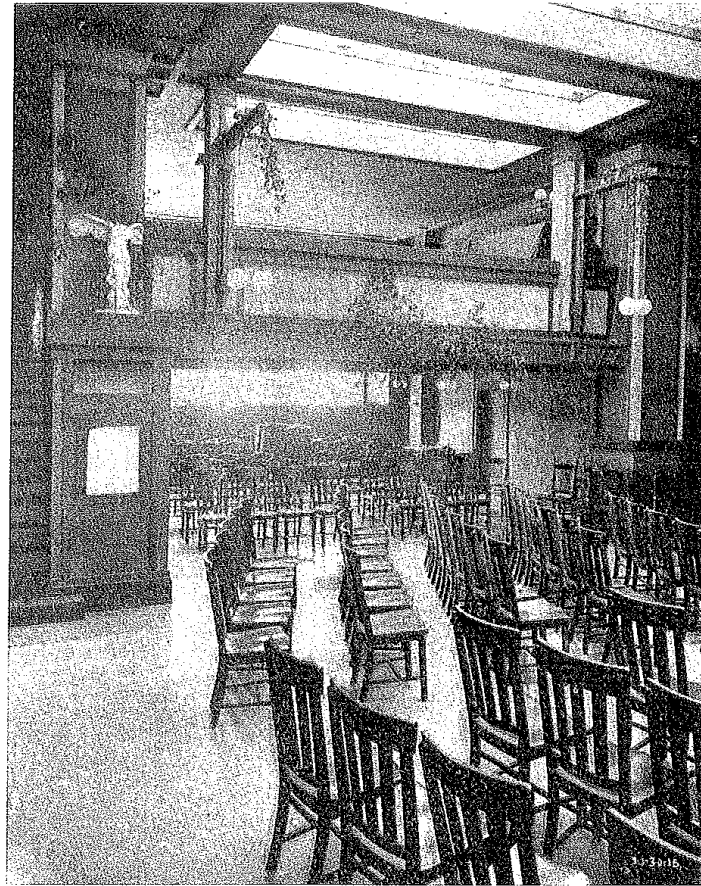


FIGURE 4

Wright, Unity House, interior looking southeast. Reprinted from *Cement World* 2 (15 February 1909).

low entrance into a brighter high ceremonial room (Fig. 8). To go from Lake Street outside to a seat in Unity Temple's lower gallery, one makes no less than nine right-angled turns, as if the passage calls up the spatial experience of a labyrinth through different levels and conditions of light. The contrast between the wide, broad steps up to the terraces and the narrow, high steps between levels in the auditorium suggests the ancient and universal religious concept of the narrow path to salvation or a heavenly realm. Through changes in light, orientation, and level, the journey from street to sanctuary is made more complex and engaging than the conventional entrance sequence through a church's narthex directly into its nave. Wright may thus have intended to create an architectural metaphor for the difficult yet

rewarding passage from the secular to the sacred. In this way, his proposed path of access to the auditorium has an archetypal quality.<sup>4</sup>

Once seated in a pew of the auditorium, one is removed from the world of the street outside, yet connected to light and air through the clerestory windows on all four sides. A brightness without direct sunlight pervades the auditorium, crowned by a skylit ceiling of twenty-five art glass panels. To one seated on the main floor, the auditorium appears cubic and vertically elevated in its proportions. Visual richness is concentrated at the front in the organ screen and pillars framing the central pulpit. As in Unity House, bands of oak delineate a complex visual system of colored planes. Yet in the auditorium, the colors are muted. Details finished in a cement plaster evoke the idea of the building as a monolith. Unity of spatial and material form signifies religious values.

If one is seated in an upper gallery, the compactness of Unity Temple's auditorium is apparent. By designing a space only 35 ft. wide between galleries on opposite sides, Wright created a room for worship that can seat 450 persons. Vertically tiered galleries on three sides enable worshippers to

FIGURE 5

Wright, Unity Temple, plan of entrance floor level (Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, Drawing No. 0611.064, © The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation).

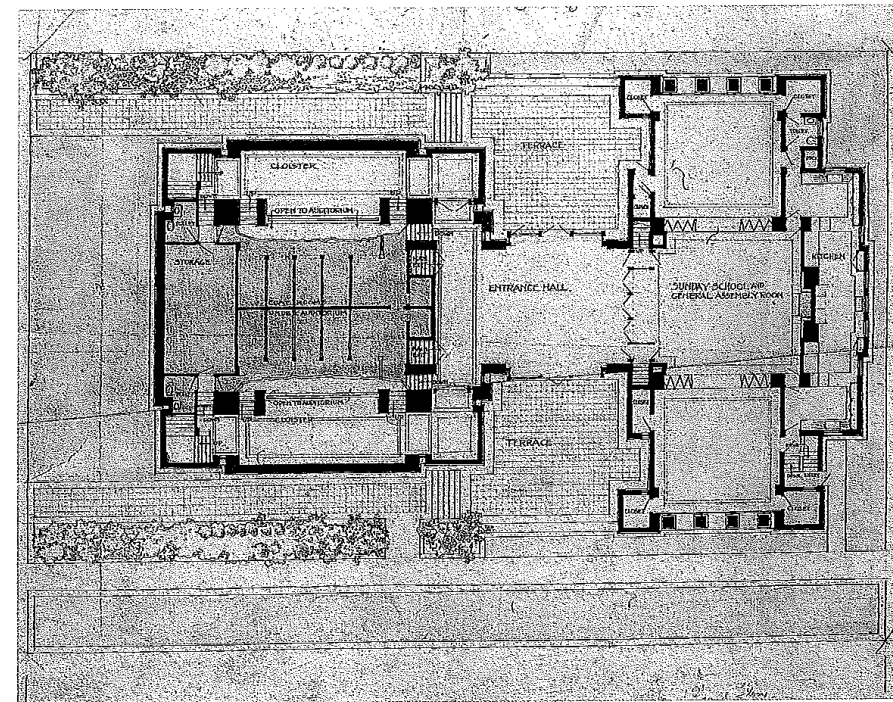


FIGURE 6

Wright, Unity Temple, interior of Unity House looking north. Photograph by Philip Turner, for Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS ILL, 16-OAKPA, 3-5.



hear the voice of a speaker at the pulpit distinctly. Here the historic type of the meetinghouse has been reinterpreted in a modern structure and innovative aesthetic. One feels not only close to the pulpit, but part of a group of worshipers visually encountered on all sides. When congregants speak their voices are also easily heard. By virtue of the architecture, a worshiper in Unity Temple cannot be solely an observer but is spatially a participant.

Unity Temple's auditorium comes to life when its organ is played and hymns are sung. When Wright wrote of the room as "a good-time place," he perhaps alluded to the importance of music in this church's worship.<sup>5</sup> No feature of the auditorium preoccupied Wright's building committee more than the organ, whose every pipe and stop were detailed to insure a range and tonality that would enable music to provide the celebratory keynote of services. In this aim, Wright's idea paralleled precisely those of the church's leadership. Here his own experience of religious music, profound from early childhood, aligned with Unity Church's tradition of worship. Yet the music most often played on Unity Temple's organ was not Wright's favorite passages from Bach, but hymns written to convey liberal religious ideas equally well known to him.

To exit the auditorium, one was to descend the stairs on either side of the pulpit. At the bottom of these stairs the hinged panels of the foyer's north wall were to be swung open for egress into the foyer. The original description of the building noted that these panels were not to "be used as entrances at times of regular services."<sup>6</sup> When these panels were closed, they

became part of the opaque wall separating the auditorium from the foyer (Fig. 9), unlike the clear plate glass panels and doors that join Unity House to the foyer on its south side (cf. Fig. 3). Wright thus made the room for worship distinct by contrasting its opaque walls and indirect access from the foyer with the glass walls and direct physical passage between the foyer and Unity House. Also, the foyer's plastered walls and ceiling, painted in an unaccented gray and yellow, are subdued relative to the more varied colors in Unity Temple and Unity House, thus marking the foyer as the room of arrival between these spaces.

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Experiencing Unity Temple raises many questions about the building's origins, intentions, and reception. It is clearly a work of Wright, whose individual aesthetic is also found in his other buildings of the period. Yet here those forms serve the special purposes and character of a church. How was Unity Temple's architecture linked to Wright's other works as a developmental

FIGURE 7

Wright, Unity Temple, plan of auditorium floor level (Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, Drawing No. 0611.065, © The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation).

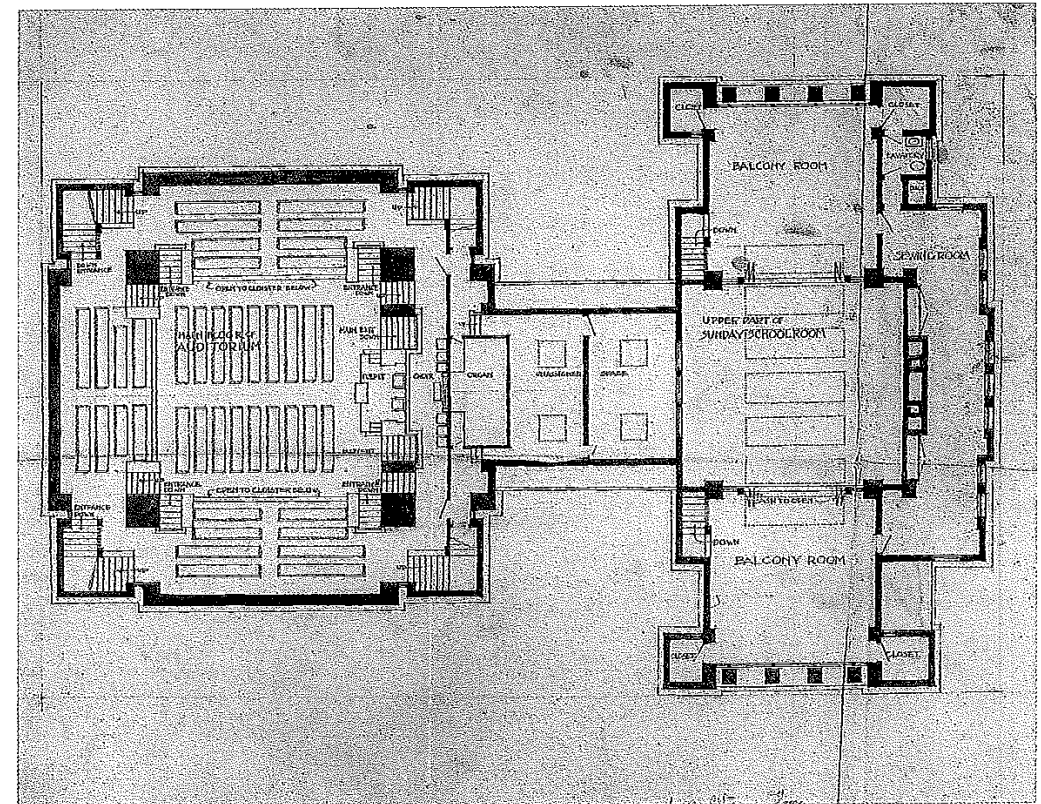
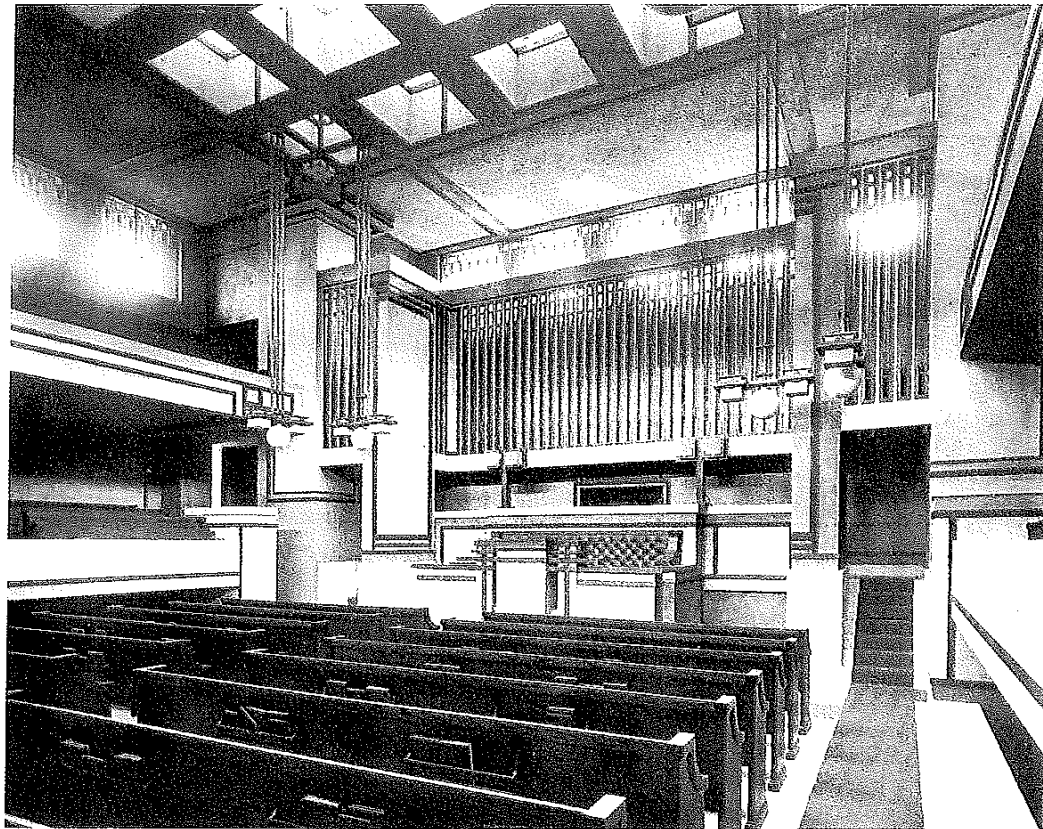




FIGURE 8

Wright, Unity Temple, auditorium looking southeast. Reprinted from *Inland Architect and News Record* 52 (December 1908).



variation on his distinctive style? This structure was inventive and original to a high degree. Yet in its forms was Wright also assimilating a wide range of sources, both from historic architectural styles and from buildings of his own time, as resources for his creativity? When he was designing the building in 1905, what architectures was he looking at, and how was he thinking of these in relation to his own artistic goals? How did Unity Temple relate to Wright's attitude toward modern expression in architecture? Specifically, how did his concept of its forms fit within a contemporaneous trend of experimentation with concrete as a new material, in his own and in American architecture? How did Wright's building relate to his other buildings from this period associated with his family's liberal religious tradition? How was this tradition being defined by his Unitarian contemporaries, and how did views of what constituted a modern liberal religion shape expectations for and reactions to Unity Temple as architecture? Finally, how did Wright reshape perceptions of the building in his later life as part of his own historiography, and in relation to discussions in modern architectural culture through the mid-twentieth century?

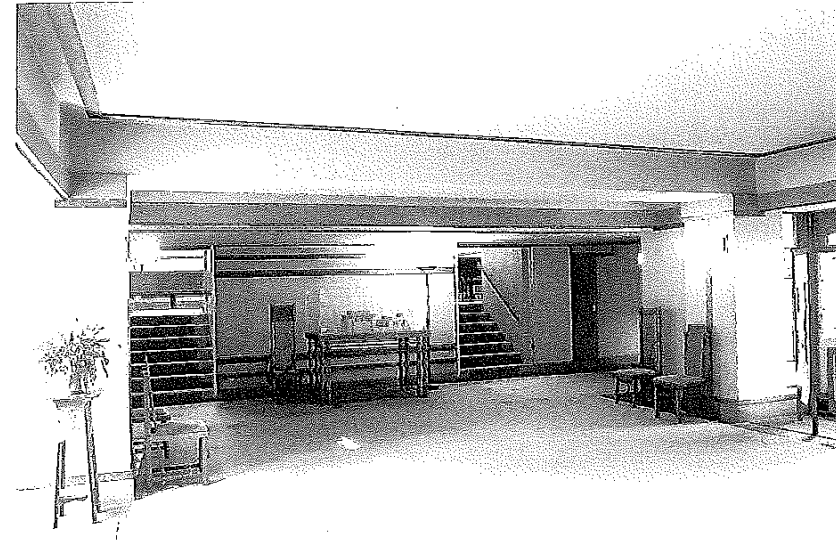


FIGURE 9

Wright, Unity Temple, entrance foyer looking northeast. Photograph by Thomas A. Heinz.

The following chapters engage this range of questions in order to generate insight into Unity Temple from as many perspectives as possible. The building marked a convergence of two dynamics: Wright's clarification and elaboration of his style, and the theological and social ideals of regional liberal religion in 1900. To reveal this process, one must critically reassess Wright's own statements on Unity Temple in light of surviving documents, drawings, and observation of the building itself. Such analysis does not refute Wright's testimony, but offers a more complex and multifaceted story. From such exploration, Unity Temple emerges as a synthesis of multiple concerns. In its creation, stylistic, theoretical, programmatic, technical, environmental, and symbolic issues are all interrelated. Wright's early church in Oak Park is inextricable from its historical contexts; yet, at the same time, it is irreducible to those contexts. A close analysis of Unity Temple in relation to Wright's thought and work illuminates this building as both an intricately consistent, densely imaginative work of art and a focus for distinctive religious and cultural aspirations of its period.