

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY MEETING HOUSE

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: First Unitarian Society Meeting House

Other Name/Site Number: N/A

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 900 University Bay Drive

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Shorewood Hills, Village of

Vicinity: \_\_

State: Wisconsin County: Dane Code: 25

Zip Code: 53705

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: x
Public-Local: \_\_
Public-State: \_\_
Public-Federal: \_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): x
District: \_\_
Site: \_\_
Structure: \_\_
Object: \_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1
\_\_
\_\_
\_\_
1

Noncontributing

1 buildings
\_\_ sites
\_\_ structures
\_\_ objects
1 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_ Entered in the National Register
- \_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register
- \_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- \_\_\_ Removed from the National Register
- \_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Religion Sub: Religious facility

Current: Religion Sub: Religious facility

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification: Modern Movement, Wrightian

Materials:

Foundation: Stone

Walls: Limestone (dolomite), Wood

Roof: Copper

Other: Glass

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.****Site and Location**

The Unitarian Meeting House is located in the Village of Shorewood Hills. Once geographically distinct from Madison, the village is currently within the borders of the city although it has never been annexed. University Avenue, a major east-west thoroughfare, serves as a principal transportation corridor between central Madison and Shorewood Hills. Several miles to the west, University Avenue becomes U.S. Route 14, the road Wright typically traveled between Madison and his home, Taliesin, near Spring Green. At the eastern edge of Shorewood Hills, University Bay Drive extends north from University Avenue toward Lake Mendota. The Meeting House is located about a block from this intersection on the west side of University Bay Drive, a secondary and much less congested street. The general physical attributes of the area have changed markedly in the fifty years since the Meeting House was constructed. Considered a rural location in the late 1940s, the site has been encroached upon by Shorewood Hills and the city of Madison and most recently by the University of Wisconsin-Madison. On what had been agricultural fields, the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics (begun in 1973) is a vast and growing neighbor across University Bay Drive. A complex of small, single story medical clinics built in the 1950s and 60s known as Doctors Park borders the church property to the south, and a cluster of private dwellings and a more recently constructed condominium development are situated to the west. Although the former rural quality of the site is no longer fully in place, the parcel is still open and the landscape does retain a sense of the building's historic surroundings.<sup>1</sup>

**Current Complex of Buildings**

The configuration of the original building site has also changed as the result of modifications to University Bay Drive and the sale, exchange or purchase of small parcels of adjoining land. A paved parking area was installed in 1960 and it has been modified through expansion. The most significant alterations to the Wright-designed building have been the construction of two additions. Extending from the west end of the building and nested into the grade that falls away from the parking area, they were designed in 1962 and 1989 by Taliesin Associated Architects and were constructed in the years immediately following. The first addition joins at an original exterior wall and generally corresponds to the footprint indicated by Wright in the original version of the floor plan. In undertaking modifications to the building, Wright's former apprentices were consciously attentive to making the additions as unobtrusive as possible. Consequently the additions do not obscure any of the characteristics that contribute to the building's significance.

**Upper Meeting House (Building A), Frank Lloyd Wright, (1947-51)**

The Unitarian Meeting House is essentially a single-story building with two wings extending in an east-west direction. Its signature feature, and the element that characterizes the spirit of the building, is the prominent blue-green copper roof with an angled glass "prow," which expresses the diamond-shaped grid that represents the underlying geometric theme of the building. The materials selected by Wright impart textural quality, integral color and emphasize its horizontal line. Tawny-colored native dolomite, quarried locally, is used for the masonry. The building is trimmed in natural finish oak, a native and plentiful wood in Wisconsin, perhaps reflecting the grove of oaks growing on the church site. Large expanses of clear glass, placed in horizontal, often full-height bands in the two wings and in the prow, incorporate nature as part of the design. Terra-cotta-colored concrete is used for the exterior steps and patio areas as well as for the interior floors. The same stone, oak and concrete also are employed as the primary materials inside, obscuring the normal distinctions between the building interior and exterior. The primary entrance is located in the southeastern corner of the church.

<sup>1</sup>See Thomas D. Brock, *Shorewood Hills: An Illustrated History* (Madison: Village of Shorewood Hills, 1999). For UW-Madison buildings, see Jim Feldman, *The Buildings of the University of Wisconsin* (Madison: University Archives, 1997).

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Although nearly hidden beneath a low overhanging roof, the location is clearly implied by the placement of a red-glazed ceramic square bearing Wright's initials in the stone wall next to a flight of low steps.

**Exterior**

The manner in which the stone is set at grade, providing a base for the building, integrates the church with its gently sloping site. The stone is laid to approximate the natural layering of the stone in the quarry, a gesture consistent with Wright's organic intent. The scale of the building is relatively small, and aside from the soaring prow the church appears deeply settled in the ground. There is no poured or block foundation beneath the church but rather a shallow trench filled with rubble on which the stone walls were constructed. The unusual construction technique, which Wright often used for sites with well-draining soil and sub-drain piping, was not his own invention but one he learned from David Timothy, a Welsh stone mason he had known in Spring Green, who told the architect that frost without water has no power. Consequently the well-drained site did not require the 42-inch foundation typical of other area buildings.

The distinctive roof rising to a height of nearly forty feet above the central gathering space, or Auditorium, is sheathed in seamed copper and is "composed of origami-like folded copper clad planes." The projecting ribs run horizontally across the roof rather than vertically, except where they follow the 60-degree angle of the gable over the prow, and serve a decorative rather than functional purpose. The structure supporting the copper roof is unusual in that no two of the twelve longspan, three-hinged arched trusses used for the Auditorium and Hearth Room are of the same size. Constructed of wood 2x4s and 2x6s, the transverse trusses become shorter as they extend upward and beyond the glass prow to form a deep overhang. These structural elements "span up to sixty-four feet without intermediate supports, and rely in part on the counterbalancing effect of deep, cantilevered eave soffits for their strength." Construction photographs show the trusses "were temporarily supported by wood shoring and scaffolding until the permanent stone masonry walls and piers were built to support them." The configuration of the bracing members as well as the placement of the trusses generally followed the four-foot diamond grid that established the placement of the walls, doors, piers and other exterior and interior elements. The 1x6 sheathing boards, nailed at a diagonal, bind the hollow triangular structure together like the stretched skin on an airplane wing.<sup>2</sup>

**Interior**

Conceived as a multi-purpose facility that would accommodate the religious and social needs of the First Unitarian Society, the Meeting House is organized in zones and demonstrates economy of space. The outer entrance vestibule is positioned beneath broad overhanging eaves and opens into a triangular foyer. Inside, through double doors with extensive glazing, the entrance hall or lobby is lit by a continuous horizontal band of windows. This space serves as a reception area and includes restrooms, an office and information counter. Beyond the lobby, the Auditorium and Hearth Room assume a counter axis and provide an open, unobstructed space although the distinct treatment of the ceilings gives definition to the contiguous spaces, which together form a large diamond, minus its acute tip. The Auditorium extends to the right (north) toward the light that streams through the soaring windows at the front of the triangular prow. A projecting choir loft and stone lectern occupy a raised rostrum, which is positioned symmetrically in front of the decorative glazing of the angled prow. The steeply angled Auditorium ceiling continues outside the glass to the exterior as the underside soffit of the roof. Opposite, the adjoining Hearth Room provides a less formal gathering space. A massive stone fireplace dominates the west wall and a serving counter that opens to an adjoining kitchen occupies most

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<sup>2</sup>Quotations about the roof are from the 1994 report prepared by Prairie Architects, Flad & Associates and Affiliated Engineers, Inc., pp. 5 and 12. For diagram of a typical Auditorium roof truss, see page 23. The report indicates that the "framing members would be precisely 6.9282" apart. There were two exceptions, and those were placed on the half-grid or half-diamond" (p. 12). See also "Historical Summary for Structural and Roof Study," Roof Task Force, 1993. Herman Felstehausen to Mary Jane Hamilton, 15 October 2002, Isthmus Architecture project file.

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of the east. The lower ceiling in this area results in a more intimate fellowship area. A six-sided opening or “dome” elevates one area of the ceiling and on its fascia, the names of prominent Unitarians have been inscribed, including that of Wright’s uncle Jenkins Lloyd Jones. The south wall is largely composed of glass windows and doors, overlooking a grassy outdoor area and the parking lot.

The Loggia continues the east-west axis established by the lobby and contains offices and a library, which were initially designed as classrooms, and a hallway with restrooms. The interior walls of the rooms in the Loggia correspond to the angled grid lines incised into the colored concrete floor; these spaces occupy approximately two thirds of the wing. A long hallway, which is lit its entire length by full-height windows and three glazed French doors, comprises the other third. The Loggia terminates at the West Living Room. Originally intended as the living and dining space of an unbuilt pastor’s residence, the irregularly shaped room features a polygonal end projecting as a glass wall of windows and doors from the body of the building. Built-in seating is situated next to a massive stone wall containing a masonry fireplace. A small kitchenette with retractable wood screen and built-in counter-height oak cabinets flank either side of the doors leading to the Loggia hall and around the corner to the first addition.

**Education Wing (Building B), Taliesin Associated Architects, 1962-64**

In the mid-1960s, an addition of approximately 6,400 square feet was constructed to provide classroom and meeting space for a rapidly growing Sunday school enrollment. The first level, which extended southwest from the West Living Room, maintained the exterior appearance and general location of the bedroom wing Wright had designed for the unrealized minister’s residence. The addition followed the same 60- and 120-degree angles and diamond grid and was constructed using the same materials and techniques as used in the original portion. A similar standing-seam copper roof was installed, and the society acquired stone from the quarry used in building the original church. Visually, the hip-roofed wing eliminated what Wright had considered the awkward termination of the original building, which he described as looking like a “turkey without a tail.” From the parking lot, the lower stories of the three-level addition are largely obscured because of the slope of the site; the flat roof over the lower part of the addition is concealed by a low stone wall.<sup>3</sup>

The addition provided additional fellowship, utility and classroom space. A second major entrance leading directly into a new lobby from the rear of the parking lot provided easy access to rooms in the original church and the three new classrooms (the original parsonage bedroom wing) near the West Living Room. The entrance also provided direct access to stairs leading to five new classrooms, restrooms and storage closets in the two lower levels of the addition.

**Lower Meeting House (Building C), Taliesin Associated Architects, 1989-1990**

By the late 1980s, the First Unitarian Society again required more space for its ever-expanding congregation and Sunday school, and it hired Wright’s former apprentices to design another addition of approximately 4,800 square feet.<sup>4</sup> Like the first addition, the second was placed at the far end of the parking lot and was situated deep within the grade, accessible by an exterior stair, and connecting with the middle level of the Education Wing (Building B). The overall hexagonal form of the addition yielded irregularly shaped rooms including five classrooms, restrooms, furnace and storage rooms and a kitchen with a serving counter. The largest space, the Gathering Room, is centrally positioned within the Lower Meeting House. It is a multi-angled, nearly two-story high room lit with tall windows and featuring a massive fireplace. Seeking a fully integrated solution that was as unobtrusive as possible, Taliesin Architects based the design on the same diamond-shaped grid used

<sup>3</sup>In 1962 the society hired Taliesin Associated Architects to prepare plans for an addition that was approved in September of that year, but construction did not begin until 1964.

<sup>4</sup>For membership numbers, see reports from Religious Education Committee and Fran Casselman, “Volunteer Handbook, Unitarian Meeting House,” 2002, section IV, p. 1 and 22, both in series 0/2/3, FUS Archives.

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elsewhere and secured more of the same stone for the walls and similar copper sheathing for the roof. The 1990 addition assumed a consciously secondary position at the rear of the parking lot, barely visible from University Bay Drive.

**Design and Construction of the Unitarian Meeting House, 1947-51****Site Acquisition**

In November 1945 when the Unitarians sold their former church, they never expected that a new building would require nearly six years to build or would cost many times more than they had planned to spend. The society sold its previous buildings, which were located in downtown Madison one block from the state Capitol, for \$105,000, a sum that established the budget for the construction of the new building and the purchase of its site. Madison's leading retail concern, Harry S. Manchester's, purchased the 1886 church and the 1911 parish house, situated on contiguous lots behind the department store, and demolished them to make way for a multi-story parking garage. The First Unitarian Society agreed to hire Frank Lloyd Wright as its architect in January 1946 following four months of deliberations. Despite his long-term ties to the society and cordial relationships with current and previous ministers, the decision to hire Wright was far from unanimous. Wright's local notoriety and reputation for running over budget had dissuaded several members of the initial building committee from supporting his hire. At least one board member consulted with a Milwaukee architect about undertaking the church job. Although the society's current minister strongly promoted Wright's hire, many of the older members expressed their concerns with the well-known architect. In a widely circulated letter one society member described Wright as "arrogant, artificial, brazen, cruel, recklessly extravagant, a publicity seeker, an exhibitionist, egotist, sensationalist, impatient, unscrupulous, untrustworthy, erratic and capricious. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Even before he was officially hired, Wright was consulted concerning the selection of a building site for the Meeting House. He advocated the rejection of the centrally located properties being considered in downtown Madison as not large enough to provide sufficient space for parking and future expansion. In the spring of 1947 the society purchased two adjoining parcels on the west side of University Bay Drive, one with an extant residence. The property was acquired from two different sellers at a total cost of \$21,500 and consisted of approximately four acres. Situated at a relatively high elevation, the general area was known locally as "Isom's Sand Hill." The terrain was formed by glacial outwash and consisted of deep veins of sand and gravel; the original land cover of oak-savanna was converted to farmland and pasture after settlement. When the congregation purchased the land, the view north to Lake Mendota was unobstructed, and the property featured a grove of oak trees. The experimental fields of the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture were located to the northeast. The rural character of the area helps to explain the title on the first set of drawings Wright later presented to the congregation, "A Country Church for the Madison Unitarians."<sup>6</sup>

**Building Requirements**

In April 1946, Rev. Kenneth L. Patton, the society's minister, wrote to the architect and identified the requirements for a building that he hoped would serve as the religious home for the Unitarian congregation and

<sup>5</sup>The First Unitarian Society realized (after fees) \$102,650 from the sale of its old church and parish house and \$23,915 from the sale of its former parsonage. At the winter parish meeting held 25 January 1946, the vote to hire Wright was twenty-five in favor, three opposed, and one abstention. See minutes for this and other church board and parish meetings from 1945-6 in box 1, series 2/1, FUS Archives. The quotation is from Jennie (Mrs. Glenn) Turner to Kenneth Patton, 22 November 1948, FUS Archives. See also Paul E. Sprague, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright and Madison: Eight Decades of Artistic and Social Interaction* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1990), 179-188 and Mary Jane Hamilton, *The Meeting House: Heritage and Vision* (Madison: Friends of the Meeting House, 1991). Harold Groves, a well-known economics professor at UW-Madison and an enthusiastic supporter of Wright, describes the church project in his unpublished autobiography *In and Out of the Ivory Tower*, 160-74.

<sup>6</sup>For the sale and purchase of Unitarian properties, see FUS board minutes for 1945-47 in the FUS Archives. For the site, see "Wright Will Design Unitarian Church Near Forest Products Lab," *Capital Times*, 26 January 1946.

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a social center for the Shorewood Hills community. Patton advocated that, where possible, functions be combined to maximize the usefulness of space. He requested “adaptability, multiplicity of functions, variation of size and shapes of the interiors by moveable partitions, etc., especially in the educational unit.” Patton identified the major areas and types of activities he wanted the new church to accommodate, including a large room for worship, lectures, forums, dining, movies, recitals and theater; a kitchen large enough to prepare meals for large groups; and a separate “functional unit” to house a nursery, kindergarten, studios and classrooms. The minister also asked that Wright integrate a home for the minister in what Patton clearly envisioned as a multi-use facility in operation seven days a week.<sup>7</sup>

**Design of the Unitarian Meeting House**

Wright’s preliminary drawings for the new Meeting House were presented to the Madison Unitarians at their spring parish meeting in May 1947. The design concept satisfied all the major elements of Rev. Patton’s program and included a three-bedroom residence for the minister. As requested, a large kitchen adjoined the church’s major activity space, and four classrooms and a study for the minister were situated in the west wing, or Loggia. The hall outside the classrooms opened through several French doors to a landscaped activity area defined by a low stone wall, expanding the building’s potential to accommodate people engaged in multiple types of events. Angled back from the Loggia at its far west end, the minister’s quarters included a kitchen, private entrance and fireplaces in both the living room and master bedroom. The early cross section shows that Wright’s initial intent was that the prow be nearly opaque and constructed primarily of concrete interspersed with small panels of colored glass.

Wright’s preliminary drawings reveal his use of a four-foot diamond or quadrilateral parallelogram with 60 and 120-degree angles as the unit grid for the design. The parallelogram provided the basis for the grid Wright used when laying out the floor plans and establishing the elevations for the unusual folded roof, angular prow and decorative details. 60- and 120-degree angles determine the position of elements within the floor plan and control the placement of interior walls as well as exterior landscape features. The drawings indicated that the grid was to be incised in the concrete floors throughout the building, and it appears in other elements, particularly in the Auditorium and contiguous Hearth Room, which has a portion of the ceiling raised and composed of triangular sections. The motif is evident in the design of triangular stone piers and in the multiple small diamonds and triangles of the colored glass set into the cast concrete and extending the full height of the prow.<sup>8</sup> In June 1947, only a month following Wright’s initial presentation of the preliminary plans, drawings for the project appeared in the Unitarian Association’s national magazine, *Christian Register*. The church design was published again in the January 1948 *Architectural Forum*, which devoted much of the issue to Wright’s recent work. While considerable advance publicity also accompanied Wright’s Guggenheim Museum design before the building was constructed (1943-59), such press coverage was by no means typical.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent design drawings for the Meeting House developed between 1948 and 1951 reveal modifications that were prompted by concerns for lowering costs, construction difficulties and changes in the building program. Still others were devised by the architect. Most significantly, the materials intended for use in the prow were

<sup>7</sup>All quotations are from Kenneth Patton to Frank Lloyd Wright, 22 April 1946, Frank Lloyd Wright Archives.

<sup>8</sup>The Frank Lloyd Wright Archives number for the Meeting House is #5031 and the William A. Storrer identification number for the church is #S291. The original drawings to which the text comments apply are #5031.14 (elevations and section) and 5031.15 (plan). In *Working with Mr. Wright: What it Was Like* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 190-1 and 216-18, Curtis Besinger identifies John Howe as the draftsman responsible for the early presentation drawings and his own and others’ roles in producing various Meeting House drawings.

<sup>9</sup>See *Christian Register* 126 (June 1947) cover and articles by Kenneth Patton (“The Church of Tomorrow” and “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Unit-arian Church”) on pages 241, 267 and 268. See also “Frank Lloyd Wright,” *Architectural Forum* 88 (January 1948): 65-156; the Meeting House warranted two full pages in the folio issue devoted to Wright’s recent work. The Meeting House also appeared on the cover of the *Christian Register* in April 1950.



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changed radically from concrete to glass, thereby replacing an opaque shell with a transparent one for this important exterior and interior element. The bands of windows were eliminated from the low stone walls on either side of the prow, a change that increased the visual density of the horizontal stone base relative to the roof. Chair storage planned for beneath the rostrum was eliminated, and the kitchen layout was altered to meet the wishes of the church women's organization. Interior walls in the classroom wing were modified to assume the 60- and 120-degree angles upon which the larger design was based; the number of rooms in the wing was increased to seven and a restroom added to accommodate the increased number of children enrolled in the Sunday school program. The elimination of the residential component corresponded to Rev. Patton's departure and the arrival in May 1949 of a new minister, Rev. Fred I. Cairns, whose views on living in a dwelling connected to the church were completely opposed to those of his predecessor.<sup>10</sup>

**Construction of the Unitarian Meeting House**

Marshall Erdman, a young Madison contractor, was hired to construct the Meeting House after bids from national construction firms far exceeded Wright's \$75,000 estimate. In late July 1949 Erdman submitted a proposal for the work indicating that he could not construct the Meeting House for less than \$102,000. Some members expressed a desire to secure additional bids, but the majority voted to hire Erdman and proceed with construction. The groundbreaking occurred less than two weeks later on 12 August 1949. Aware that the cost of the site combined with Erdman's admittedly conservative estimate already exceeded what the Unitarians had hoped to spend on the new Meeting House, the contractor and congregation undertook measures to minimize cost. Arrangements were made with Albert J. Loeser, the owner of a quarry near Prairie du Sac, for the purchase of the dolomite for the walls of the new church at the very low price of \$20.00 per cord. Loeser agreed to further reduce prices if society members hauled the stone themselves. Men, women and children assembled almost every weekend from the fall of 1949 through the spring of 1950 for the sixty-mile round trip to the quarry. It has been estimated that the volunteer stone haulers loaded and then unloaded approximately one thousand tons of stone. Erdman's carpenters, masons and other tradesmen twice donated a day of free labor, and society members helped with installing dry wall, taping, plastering, painting and similar jobs. A group of women wove a hand-loomed decorative curtain that would be installed in the sixty-foot opening between the Auditorium and Hearth Room. Finally, when the congregation's funds were nearly exhausted, Wright brought in his Taliesin apprentices to complete the two-year construction project.<sup>11</sup>

Even before construction was underway, Wright encountered difficulties with the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, the state agency responsible for structural standards. The commission was concerned with the unusual design of the roof and repeatedly requested structural drawings and calculations. A decade earlier Wright had clashed with the same body over the structural veracity of his flaring concrete columns for the S.C. Johnson Wax Company's Administration Building in Racine. Wright received a letter in 1948 that cited the design for the Unitarian Meeting House with over a dozen infractions. The commission continued its attempts to secure the necessary design documents, but Wright ignored them until June 1950 when the commission threatened to stop further work on the church just as the installation of the copper roof was to begin. Wright offered to bring in a scale model of the truss system but was told he still needed to submit drawings for the

<sup>10</sup>The preliminary drawings for the church, preserved at the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, are dated April 1947; later ones are dated from September 1948 through August 1951. For Fred I. Cairns, see Casselman, "Volunteer Handbook," section IX, p. 3; "Cairns Quits Unitarian Pulpit in Dispute Over Church Building," *Capital Times*, 11 December 1951.

<sup>11</sup>For Erdman's cost estimate, see minutes of member meeting held July 31, 1949 and church board minutes 1 August 1949, both in box 1, series 2/1, FUS Archives. For groundbreaking, see Lucy McDermott, "Break Ground for Unitarian Church," *Capital Times*, 12 August 1949. Prior to securing the church job, Erdman had built primarily houses, including one for a member of the church board. He later became the client for three Wright-designed prefab houses (Taliesin Nos. 5518, 5706 and 5913) and a motel (No. 5736). For the contributions of professional craftsmen and Taliesin apprentices, see John Newhouse, "Builders Donate 8 Skilled Hours," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 24 September 1950 and Bessinger, *Working with Wright*, 229-32.

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commission's engineers to review. Wright finally provided them, but only after stalling for some two years.<sup>12</sup>

As a roofing material, copper appealed to Wright as a building element with integral color, especially once its patina has developed, and for the ease with which it could be manipulated to give greater emphasis to angles through the placement of battens. Wright had shown an inclination towards the use of copper for roofs since the mid-thirties when it was integrated as a roofing material for even the most modest of dwellings included in his Broadacre City model (1935), which was intended to illustrate his concept of urban decentralization. The model was featured in an article in the 1935 *Architectural Record*, which noted that "Copper for roofs is indicated generally on the model as a permanent cover capable of being worked in many appropriate ways and giving a general harmonious color effect to the whole."<sup>13</sup>

Prior to World War II soft copper was typically recommended for roofs because of its flexibility, but even then a minimum 16-ounce weight typically was required. After the war, harder and heavier copper became the norm, and joints other than expansion joints were usually soldered. The Revere Copper Company presumably provided details about the newer practices when Wolf Kubly and Hirsig Co. of Madison, the sheet metal contractor for the Meeting House, asked for advice about the church project. Likely intended as a cost saving measure, a 14-ounce weight copper was specified when the 15,500 square foot roof was installed. The cost of copper had risen disproportionately between when the church was designed in 1947 and when the material was purchased. In fact, the higher price prompted a special vote by the parish in the fall of 1949 approving an additional \$10,000 for the copper rather than substituting wood shingles, which would have been less costly. By the time the metal roof was finally installed during the late summer of 1950, the cost of copper was even higher and would have been subject to impending restrictions on all metals due to the outbreak of the Korean War earlier that summer.<sup>14</sup>

A major design modification was initiated during the summer of 1950, probably just before the installation of the copper roof. Shortly after Wright returned from a trip to London he conducted an inspection of the Meeting House construction site and afterward developed a different idea for the treatment of the prow area. Up until that time the prow was to have been built of patterned concrete block with inserts of stained glass. Upon seeing the roof structure in place, Wright decided to retain the open quality of the prow and prepared a drawing showing a series of angled two-inch by twelve-inch wood louvers into which panes of 1/4 inch plate glass would be fitted. William Wesley Peters, Wright's son-in-law and the senior Taliesin apprentice who served as project manager and structural engineer for the Meeting House, questioned how the louver and pane assembly was to be supported and challenged Wright's assertion that the glass would perform a structural function. Taliesin apprentice Curtis Besinger eventually devised 1/4-inch by 2 1/2-inch steel supports with welded tops that were eased into the wood and held in place with screws. A year later, Wright decided that he did not like the resulting pattern made by the strips and told the apprentice to remove them; some were taken out, but some were

<sup>12</sup>For the squabble over the Johnson Wax columns, see Jonathan Lipman, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Johnson Wax Buildings* (New York: Rizzoli Press, 1986), 51-62; and Industrial Commission correspondence from Frank Lloyd Wright Archives and box 957, Wisconsin Industrial Commission Records, Series 2284, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

<sup>13</sup>"Broadacre City: A New Community Plan," *Architectural Record* 77 no. 4 (1935): 253.

<sup>14</sup>Frank Lloyd Wright drawing, "Framing Plan," (Sheet 6), 15 September 1948 (5031.46, Frank Lloyd Wright Archives) specified 14-ounce copper. In her 1976 report, Barbara Armstrong wrote, "Copper expands more than most metals under temperature changes, and the night-day, summer-winter, sun-rain temperature variations on a roof are extreme... roof panels are always held down only with clips, and are thus able to move free across the sheathing." The Revere Company was responsible for much of the new research conducted on the use of copper during the 1940s. See Barbara Armstrong, "Meeting Houses Roof-Interim Report," 20 September 1976, First Unitarian Society Archives. 20-ounce weight copper and Thiokol joints at 20-foot intervals were used on the first addition constructed in the 1960s; prior to the 1970s, no major leakage problems like those experienced with the original building had occurred, but the roof of Building B was repaired in 1997. For discussion and votes on the use of copper or shingles, see minutes of board and parish meetings held 4 and 7 October 1949, box 1, series 2/1, FUS Archives.

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left in place.<sup>15</sup>

Numerous other modifications to the design were made during construction, many of which can be attributed to Wright's personal supervision of the project. Most typically, one of Wright's apprentices served as an on-site project manager to his projects and could authorize changes only after consulting with Wright, who usually made infrequent inspections of his job sites. Since the Meeting House was being constructed along Wright's principal route to and from Madison and reflective of his personal sense of commitment to the project, Wright visited the site often. If he did not like the way the masons were setting up the stone, he would insist that they tear down and replace entire sections of the walls to accentuate the effect of random protruding stone faces. Even though the contractor built the front reception counter as shown on Wright's plans, when the architect saw it he demanded that the counter be rebuilt with the opening at the opposite end. In August 1951, Wright was at the site nearly every day to supervise the work of his apprentices. Although none of the drawings for the Meeting House show a sound baffle above the choir loft, Wright decided to add one after hearing a rehearsal for a music program in the nearly completed Auditorium and realizing the acoustics were unsatisfactory. While the architect's personal scrutiny provided him the opportunity to refine the overall quality of his design, the additional labor and materials required for these and other changes further increased the cost of the already over-budget building.

At least one modification was made without Wright's knowledge; steel beams were added to provide more support to the structural wood trusses above the Auditorium ceiling. Erdman presumably made these and similar modifications after consulting with Wes Peters. Other apprentices helped with landscaping, plastering, painting and stone work; they also worked with society members to build interior furnishings, construct copper-colored planters and sew cushions and curtains. Gene Masselink, an apprentice and graphic artist, hand lettered the custom signs on the doors, the names of famous Unitarians in the Hearth Room and a Persian inscription across the balcony at the rear of the Auditorium. In a bold move so close to completion, Peters increased the relative height of the entrance overhang, which was at only 5 feet 10 inches, by removing already in-place concrete steps and re-pouring new lowered entry steps. Their goal was to have the building—or at least the Auditorium—ready for two fundraising lectures that Wright had agreed to give in late August 1951.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Meeting House was largely completed by the time Wright gave his lectures in August, during the next several years the congregation continued to work on unfinished interior projects and undertook two minor ones that slightly altered the exterior. The Unitarians continued to plaster and paint classrooms, fabricating screens for the windows and doors and building cabinets in the classrooms. They enclosed in glass the Japanese prints Wright had donated, replaced the original cushions on the wood pew/benches in the Auditorium and finished the West Living Room. In the fall of 1952 the church board authorized construction of the Wright-designed triangular exterior vestibule. Although funds were tight, enclosing the area was a priority in order to

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<sup>15</sup>Curtis Besinger, *Working with Mr. Wright: What It Was Like*, 216-17. During a conversation with Mary Jane Hamilton, Marshall Erdman said that the reason for the change from concrete and glass to clear glass and wood was because he couldn't figure out how to build what Wright had proposed. It seems possible that Wright may have discussed the matter with Erdman during the visit that Besinger describes and agreed to design an alternative, but he may also have realized on his own how dark the interior of the Auditorium would have been with only the relatively small pieces of glass allowing light into the room, completely shutting off views of the trees outside and lake in the distance. In a letter to Wright dated 20 August 1951, Erdman refused to take responsibility for the consequences of removing the steel supports.

<sup>16</sup>Both Peters and Erdman are now deceased, but in recorded or taped interviews both men mention altering the lightweight trusses ("toothpicks" Wright called the 2x4s used to construct the original trusses) that broke when Erdman's crew attempted to lift them from the ground. Erdman also described the addition of the extra steel. Besinger never knew that his truss drawings were not followed or about the extra steel. See Erdman and Peters, interview with Indira Berndtson, 7 August 1990, FLW Archives; and Erdman and FUS members interview, undated video recording, and Erdman interview, 26 October 1993 (part of Flad/Prairie/AEI roof structure analysis) both in FUS Archives. For the 1951 push, see "Many Hands Join Labor of Love," *Capital Times*, 1 August 1951.

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prevent the heating pipes in the concrete floor from freezing. A few years later, in 1958, they removed the diamond shaped copper bell from the tip of the prow.<sup>17</sup>

That the Unitarian Meeting House ended up costing far more than Wright's first estimate of \$60,000 and his later second estimate of \$75,000 is not unusual for Wright-designed buildings, which routinely went over budget. Unity Temple, Fallingwater, the Johnson Wax buildings and many other well-known masterpieces came in at least double or even triple the early projected costs. In 1949 Erdman warned that the new church couldn't be built for less than \$102,000, but the actual cost far exceeded even the \$165,000 figure quoted in the 1952 *Architectural Forum* article that featured the church. Neither readers nor members then knew the exact figure, since Wright had insisted that all bills be sent to him, and a year after the church was largely completed, he still held unpaid invoices totaling thousands of dollars. Only in May 1954, after finally receiving all the related bills, was the society's treasurer able to report the cost as \$213,487.61, nearly four times more than Wright's original 1946 estimate.<sup>18</sup>

**Modifications**

By 1960 there were significant leaks in the ceiling of the Hearth Room, as well as a major crack extending through the floor in that area. Photographs from the period show a depression in the roof on the west side of the building. In 1961 Taliesin Associated Architects (TAA) was hired to address these concerns. In an attempt to correct the deflection in the roof trusses TAA recommended adding a one-inch diameter steel cable to provide greater tension between the two bearing points of the longest transverse truss. This was the first of multiple repairs to the trusses and copper roof. An ongoing program of sealing the vertical joints in the roof also was undertaken, carried out initially by a sheet metal contractor and later by the House and Grounds Committee of the First Unitarian Society. However, because these measures failed to rectify the deflection of the roof over the Hearth Room, rain water and melted snow continued to collect in the depression and then migrated through the underlayment and into the building, eventually staining and damaging the interior plaster.<sup>19</sup> For the crack in the Hearth Room floor, which was attributed to the faulty placement of reinforcing steel, the architects recommended that five steel jack columns be placed under the slab over the basement.

When the first addition was adjoined to the original structure, alterations to the original portion affected primarily the West Living Room and Loggia, although there were cosmetic changes in other parts of the building. At the west end, the small kitchen and study were removed to create a hallway with storage cabinets and coat racks, and two new restrooms were placed adjacent to the living room. The latter replaced the original restrooms in the Loggia that were adapted for use as a janitor's closet and storage area. In the Loggia area, a second pane of glass was added to the window wall, hot water baseboard heat and air-conditioning units were installed in some rooms, the dividing walls in all but one of the seven classrooms were removed to create fewer

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<sup>17</sup>The replacement fabric selected during the 1950s to recover the bench covers and cushions repeated the color of the originals, which had faded. However, the use of nylon instead of sailcloth fabric, rigid filling, thinner cushions, decorative welt edge treatment and lack of pockets for hymnals distinguished them from the originals. When the old fir plywood benches were later replaced with benches made of oak-veneer plywood (as Wright had intended), the fabric and cushion style again replicated the originals. See Casselman, "Volunteer Handbook," section IV, pp. 25-29. For the removal of the bell, see FUS board minutes for 7 April 1958, box 1, series 2/1, FUS Archives.

<sup>18</sup>Wright received only \$6,000 (10% of the original \$60,000 estimate) for his work on the Meeting House. Erdman paid for plastering the Auditorium ceiling and was left with a truck that had been badly damaged by the 1,000 tons of stone hauled by church members during dozens of trips to and from the distant quarry. Early construction estimates provided by contractors other than Erdman have proved elusive.

<sup>19</sup>For problems with roof leaks and the floor crack, see "Report of General Conditions of Unitarian Meeting House," 31 August 1960; TAA's estimate to correct those problems and address other repairs, 24 July 1961; correspondence between William Wesley Peters, Tom Casey and Arnold Roy of TAA and Alice Iverson and Dale Bender, chairs of the House Committee, 1960-62; and Casselman, "Volunteer Handbook," section IV, p. 30, all in FUS Archives.

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larger rooms, and an exit to the parking area from the West Living Room was closed. A new entrance lobby with access to both the addition and the original building was created.<sup>20</sup>

Still other modifications to the Meeting House and the adjoining site were carried out in the ensuing decades. In 1970-71 a large pipe organ replaced the original electric organ. The former instrument was located in the choir loft above the rostrum, while the new one was placed to the right of the rostrum, and its 847 pipes were installed in the prow, stairwell and choir loft. Placing the pipes required removing some of the interior glass panes and taking out a toilet behind the rostrum. Although the sound quality of the new organ far surpassed that of the smaller electric one, its placement at the front of the room diminished the effect of the rostrum as the focal point of the room and compromised the otherwise symmetrical layout of the space. Additionally, the pipes in the prow obscured the outside view and restricted the amount of light entering the Auditorium. When asked about the proposed location, Wes Peters replied that it [placement of organ and pipes] was “utterly impossible,” but the society went forward with the installation of their new organ anyway.<sup>21</sup>

In the early 1970s plastic sheets were placed over the ceiling joists in the Hearth Room to trap and hold water that leaked through the roof. This simple preventive measure worked fairly well, but if a large amount of water collected the plastic sheets overflowed, causing major damage to the ceiling below. During the mid-1970s the First Unitarian Society secured two federal grants to deal with the ongoing leaks in the copper roof of the Meeting House. In 1976 the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory analyzed one of the battens in the depressed area over the Hearth Room and found evidence of an advanced stage of brown-rot decay, and the underlayment was found to be damp. The first phase of the roof repair entailed the repair of a small section of the copper roof and the replacement of damaged wood. After the removal of old 1½-inch insulation, a combination of fiberglass and mineral wool was blown into the attic to a depth of eight inches. These measures again failed to solve the moisture problems, and in 1978 a portion of the underlayment and copper roof over the Hearth Room were replaced as part of a second federally supported roof project.<sup>22</sup>

In 1994, the society undertook a major roof project involving the structural reinforcement of three trusses and the replacement of 7,000 square feet of heavier gauge copper roofing. As part of this project, the copper sheathing was removed from the entire upper roof and entrance areas and the trusses in those areas straightened and stiffened with steel and 16-ounce gauge copper installed. The impetus behind this project occurred in the winter of 1992-93, when the leaks and moisture problems at the Meeting House became especially severe. As part of a Roof Rehabilitation Program developed by Structural Research, Inc. (SRI), the original flat roof over the West Living Room was removed and replaced. However, before proceeding with SRI's proposed replacement of the entire copper roof over the Auditorium and Hearth Room (projected to cost around \$300,000, or more than the original cost of the church) the Society's Roof Study Committee proposed that a structural analysis of the roof be done to “assure that a new roof would not be at risk due to any structural inadequacy.” To undertake this work, the society commissioned Flad & Associates, Prairie Architects and Affiliated Engineers, Inc., which made a careful analysis of each structural member of the roof. The architectural and engineering team determined that the roof structure was generally in excellent condition except for the Hearth Room and the front entrance canopy.

<sup>20</sup>For dates of these changes, see FUS board minutes and Strang, Inc. and Isthmus Architecture, Inc., *Facilities Needs Report*, July 1999, appendix.

<sup>21</sup>For letter date and the organ, see *Ibid.*, 6-8.

<sup>22</sup>Both grants were administered through the Historic Preservation Division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. When accepting the grant funds, the society entered into a covenant with the National Park Service and agreed that the original Meeting House and 1960s addition “shall be maintained, repaired and administered so as to preserve the historical integrity of the features, materials appearance, workmanship and environment.” The covenant, signed by the society's current president on 23 May 1978, remains in effect until 2008.

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Based on these studies, the trusses in the Hearth Room that had deflected were raised to their original position (about six inches) using a crane and then reinforced with steel channels. All of the original supporting arches were left in place, but Flad designed a series of steel beams, channels and trusses to supplement those that were not structurally sound. They also added steel reinforcements to the cantilevered entrance canopy. When this work was completed, a major portion of the copper roof was replaced with a felt underlayment, a self-sealing waterproof membrane and new copper, which has been allowed to age.<sup>23</sup>

**Building Stewardship over Fifty Years**

In general, modifications to the Meeting House have not compromised the integrity of Wright's original design, and the First Unitarian Society has been committed to the excellent stewardship of their church. Since the building was completed, the society has maintained a board-level committee whose ongoing responsibility has been the maintenance, repair and preservation of the church and property. As with other Wright-designed buildings, the Meeting House has required more than the normal amount of repair, especially due to its unusual copper roof. The First Unitarian Society also has benefited from the involvement of the Friends of the Meeting House, a volunteer group organized in 1976 to preserve, protect and provide financial assistance in maintaining the historic integrity of the Wright-designed building and its furnishings. One of the group's earliest activities was to help secure a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to repair a leak in the copper roof over the Hearth Room. The Friends also contributed to the 1990s roof project and has undertaken the restoration and display of historic Wright-designed decorative items and the supervision of guided tours of the building. The Friends has also provided ongoing training for about fifty volunteers who conduct guided tours of the Meeting House.<sup>24</sup>

Even before the Meeting House was completed, architects and other visitors began descending on the construction site, photographing the still unfinished church and requesting tours, a phenomenon that has continued to the present. Immediately following completion, some 3,000 people arranged for tours of the building. Since then, travel guides and books devoted to prominent architectural sites, as well as state and local tourist publications have routinely identified the Meeting House as a potential visitor destination. The church also is one of eight sites promoted by the Frank Lloyd Wright Heritage Tourism Program, a statewide consortium of Wright-designed public and semi-public buildings. Indicative of the widespread national and international interest in the Unitarian Meeting House, more than 19,000 visitors from fifty states and at least sixty-six countries toured the Meeting House in the 1990s.<sup>25</sup>

**Noncontributing Building**

Within the boundaries there is a building that is noncontributing. It was originally a house which was moved to its current location (to the west of the Meeting House) on the property in order to construct the Meeting House. Today it is referred to as the annex. The annex is a two story L-shaped building with an attic and is half timber and stuccoed with some brick. For some time it was used for Sunday School and storage. Today it is still used

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<sup>23</sup>The Flad/Prairie/AEI Roof Structure Analysis was approved at the parish meeting held in November 1993 and the repair work was carried out in 1994. The quotation is from Jane Clay's "Meeting House Roof Renovation Project," 1994. An additional benefit of the research on the structural elements was the creation of "as is" drawings of the entire roof structure, something that was not previously available. Only one of the original construction-era drawings of the roof structure corresponded to what was actually built, which is not surprising considering the many changes made during the two-year construction period. See also Casselman, "Volunteer Handbook," section IV, pp. 25-29.

<sup>24</sup>The chair of the Buildings and Grounds Committee is a member of the society's major governing board. The extensive 1994 roof project received a certificate of commendation from the Wisconsin Historical Society. Between 1992 and 2001, the Friends of the Meeting Houses donated over \$64,00 to the First Unitarian Society for various projects relating to the church. Guided tours are offered daily from May through October and special group tours arranged throughout the year.

<sup>25</sup>The 1952 figure is from the FUS board minutes; the 19,000 figure is based solely on signatures in the church guest book. Many of those were leaders of large tour groups, so the actual number of visitors is probably substantially higher.

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for storage.





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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

In 1946, when the First Unitarian Society of Madison hired Frank Lloyd Wright to design its new Meeting House, it contracted the services of an internationally known architect with local ties. In the years leading up to the construction of the Meeting House, Wright's reputation had been solidified with numerous museum retrospectives documenting his architectural achievements, and a number of full-length publications were released featuring his work. In 1940, the Museum of Modern Art mounted a major retrospective devoted to Wright, and the following year an anthology of his writings *Frank Lloyd Wright on Architecture: Selected Writings, 1894-1940*, edited by Frederick Gutheim was published. Also in 1941, Wright received the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture from Great Britain. *In the Nature of Materials: 1887-1941*, an in-depth study of Wright's work by the prominent architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock was published in 1942, and in 1943 the revised edition of Wright's *An Autobiography* was published. In 1949, the same year construction began on the Meeting House, Wright received the prestigious Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects and published his *Genius and the Mobocracy*. In 1951, as the building was being completed, "Sixty Years of Living Architecture," a major retrospective of Wright's work opened in Florence. The exhibition traveled to Zurich, Paris, Munich, Rotterdam, Mexico City, New York and finally Los Angeles, where it closed in 1954. Because the Meeting House was still incomplete when the show opened, the church was not included in the European venues, but large photographic murals of the church were added in New York and Los Angeles.<sup>26</sup>

The inclusion of the Unitarian Meeting House for the final installations of this important exhibit indicates not only that Wright's significance was fully established, but also that the Meeting House was considered among his finest buildings. Less than a year after his death in April 1959, the Unitarian Meeting House was selected by the American Institute of Architects as meriting special recognition within Wright's body of work. Although not yet ten years old, the Meeting House established itself among Wright's more than four hundred buildings as one of seventeen worthy of this distinction. The initial impetus for the list came from a *New York Times* article by Aline Saarinen published shortly after Wright's death. In 1964, negative photostat reproductions of original working drawings for nearly all of the buildings were archived in a fireproof vault at the AIA's national headquarter in Washington, D.C. In 1966 the Meeting House and the other buildings received decorative metal plaques denoting their special status with the AIA.<sup>27</sup> In another instance of early recognition, in 1973, the

<sup>26</sup>See Frederick Gutheim, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright on Architecture: Selected Writings, 1894-1940*. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941) and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials: 1887-1941* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942). In 1945 the Milwaukee Art Institute organized a major exhibit of the architect's work, and in that same year Wright or one of his designs was featured in at least 23 articles, books or national publications. In 1946 the number rose to 32, by 1949 there were at least 53 and the number of publications by or about Wright continued to escalate throughout the remainder of his life and since. The Unitarian Meeting House was photo panel No. 95 in the exhibit in New York and Los Angeles; the same side view also appeared in the related pamphlet.

<sup>27</sup>Aline Saarinen, "Preserving Wright's Architecture," *New York Times*, 19 April 1959. For a related article, see "Watch on Wright Landmarks," *Architectural Record* 126 (September 1959): 9. *Architectural Record* reported that, "In the first such joint effort in their history, the American Institute of Architects and the National Trust for Historic Preservation have selected sixteen buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright for recommendation 'to the nation' as important landmarks in American architectural history, which ought to be preserved in their original form. This action, which in effect sets up a national watch over the buildings named, was formalized in a resolution passed by its Board of Directors at its New Orleans meeting less than three months after Wright's death. It had first been urged in a New York Times article by Aline Saarinen." In addition, R. R. Cuscaden, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Drawings, Preserved," *Prairie School Review* 1 (1964): 18, which indicated that the list had been expanded to include Unity Church in Oak Park, Illinois and came to a total of seventeen. The AIA committee was identified as Alden Dow, F.A.I.A., Edward Stone, F.A.I.A. (later replaced by Morgan Yost, F.A.I.A.) and Karl Kamrath, F.A.I.A. as chairman. The committee held some of its meetings at Taliesin in order to confer with Olgivanna Wright, Gene Masselink and William Wesley Peters. The buildings honored were: W.H. Winslow House, River Forest, Illinois; Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Oak Park, Illinois (NHL, 1976); Ward Willitts House, Highland Park, Illinois;

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Unitarian Meeting House was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Receiving this honor after only twenty-two instead of the customary fifty year wait, provides yet another example of the distinction that has been extended toward the Unitarian Meeting House.<sup>28</sup>

It is fitting that the Meeting House is acknowledged for its importance, both among Wright's works and also as a significant example of twentieth century American architecture. The significance applies solely to the original Frank Lloyd Wright-designed portion of the Meeting House complex. Later additions are not considered to contribute to the national importance of the building.<sup>29</sup>

The Unitarian Meeting House can be seen as exemplifying national trends in post-World War II American culture for its suburban location and modernist design, but it does so with an air of nonconformity that reflects the social and architectural sensibilities Frank Lloyd Wright had cultivated late in his career and which were unique to the architect, who was truly an American master. The church is significant as a highly personal expression of the faith, heritage and aspirations of Wright as he approached the end of his life. The Meeting House also is significant internationally as a premier example of Wright's late Usonian architecture, yet unusual for its non-residential application. As was typical throughout Wright's career, the Meeting House was ahead of its time and presaged trends to come. The amalgam of old and new elements in the Meeting House reveals how very personal the building was to Wright and therefore how unique it is within his work. Drawing upon youthful memories and other religious structures with which he was familiar or had designed, Wright created a church that bears testimony both to his nineteenth-century heritage and twentieth-century vision. In April 1959 Rev. Gaebler, the minister of the First Unitarian Society of Madison, officiated at Wright's funeral at Unity Chapel (near Taliesin) and burial in the adjacent Lloyd Jones family cemetery. At his time of death, the Unitarian Meeting House was the only large public building Wright had lived to see constructed in Wisconsin, an architectural signature statement in the state where he was born and the city he had once called home.

### **Cultural Significance**

Following World War II population shifted dramatically from the cities to the suburbs. For those building new homes in the late 1940s, available lots within cities were often small and expensive, and loan applications for some urban areas were routinely turned down. On the other hand, the Federal Housing Administration and other programs favored the rapidly growing suburbs. Between 1948 and 1958 eleven million of the thirteen million new houses constructed were built in suburban locations. With the development of the areas outside of cities, there was a corresponding increase in church construction. Additionally, there was a conscious effort on the part of most denominations to build a new type of church in which traditional ecclesiastic references were being replaced with new and more abstract forms, and the use of more common surface materials, such as pre-cast concrete, came into wider use. There was also the new demand that suburban churches function as community centers in addition to serving as religious facilities. These shifts occurred in each region of the

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Unity Church, Oak Park, Illinois (NHL, 1970); Frederick C. Robie House, Chicago, Illinois (NHL, 1963); "Hollyhock House," Los Angeles, California; Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin (NHL, 1976); "Fallingwater," Bear Run, Pennsylvania (NHL, 1976); Administration Building, S.C. Johnson and Son, Inc., Racine, Wisconsin (NHL, 1976); Taliesin West, Phoenix, Arizona (NHL, 1982); Unitarian Meeting House, Madison, Wisconsin; Research Tower, S.C. Johnson and Son, Inc., Racine, Wisconsin (NHL, 1976); V.C. Morris Shop, San Francisco, California; H. C. Price Tower, Bartlesville, Oklahoma; Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, New York; and Paul R. Hanna House, Palo Alto, California (NHL, 1989). See also, Karl Kamrath, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Drawings in the AIA Archives," *AIA Journal* 42 (July 1964): 50-51. "Frank Lloyd Wright and the 17 Plaques," *Progressive Architecture* 47 (September 1966): 59-60.

<sup>28</sup>See National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, prepared July 1972 by Preservation Planner Jeffrey M. Dean of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; the Meeting House was added to the Register in April 1973.

<sup>29</sup>In 1998, the NHL Survey asked a panel of three Wright specialists, Dr. Paul Sprague, University of Chicago (retired), Dr. Paul S. Kruty, University of Illinois and Mr. Randolph C. Henning, AIA, of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to compile a list of all the Frank Lloyd Wright designs that may qualify for NHL designation. The First Unitarian Society Meeting House was on this list.

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country and were especially prevalent in the Midwest.<sup>30</sup>

**American Cultural Trends Following World War II**

Following the war, booming economic conditions and the growing availability of consumer products, including housing and automobiles, led Americans to a way of life outside of central urban areas. Planned suburban communities grew at an unprecedented rate, and the Federal government supported the move to assist developers in creating these planned residential areas on what had been agricultural land outside of urban areas. For example, the Federal Housing Administration provided low-cost financing to William Levitt, who between 1947 and 1951, erected 17,447 houses on several thousand acres of Long Island, creating a new postwar community of more than 40,000 called Levittown. The increasing availability and use of private automobiles was central to the movement towards suburbanization, and after the war their number steadily increased. By 1954 there were some forty-seven million registered passenger vehicles in the United States. The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 facilitated the expansion of highways as well as interurban and suburban roads. By 1960, “60 million Americans—one third of the population—were living in newly built suburbs that were virtually nonexistent in 1950.”<sup>31</sup>

Concurrent with this massive suburbanization, religion and church construction flourished immediately following the war, and the Unitarian Meeting House was constructed at the onset of a wave of suburban church building that affected the entire country. \$3 billion was spent on new church construction between 1944 and 1945; the previous peak had been in the 1920s when \$1.3 billion had been spent. In the first half of 1946 an additional 900 churches costing approximately \$37,160,000 were started, and in just one month of that year another 331 new churches at a cost of \$27,170,000 were being planned.<sup>32</sup> By 1950, regular church attendance was up to 55% within the entire US population. During the mid-fifties this trend was noted in scholarly and professional journals, as well as the popular press. Books were published on the phenomenon and how it affected aspects of the national identity and popular culture. In 1954, the phrase “under God” was added to the pledge of allegiance and “In God We Trust” became the national motto. In 1957, when asked the question “What is your religion?” 96 percent of Americans cited a specific affiliation. Religion became a means of affirming the “American way of life,” which was important during the Cold War era because the Soviet Union and its communist allies were avowed atheists. Church attendance promulgated peace of mind in an “age of anxiety.”<sup>33</sup>

**Post-World War II Ecclesiastic Design**

One in four churches constructed during the post-war period did not make use of architectural form traditionally associated with ecclesiastic design, but instead were built in a “modern” idiom. This trend was evident in all denominations, as reported by *Time* magazine in 1955.<sup>34</sup> Wright considered his Usonian architecture to be in theoretical opposition to the tenants of the European-derived International Style, which was essentially an urban

<sup>30</sup>Construction statistics are from Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday & Co., 1961), 15-17. For postwar demographics and society, see Richard Horn, *Fifties Style* (New York: Friedman/Fairfax Publishers), 12; and William L. O’Neil, “Moving to the Suburbs on the GI Bill,” in Stuart A. Kallen, ed., *The 1950s* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000), 139-40. For the FHA, see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 240-48.

<sup>31</sup>Kallen, *The 1950s*, 138-39, 142. For population density figures, see G. Scott Thomas, *The United States of Suburbia: How the Suburbs Took Control of America and What They Plan To Do With It* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998), 137. For postwar construction, see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream*, 251-52. For automobile and road construction, see Horn, *Fifties Style*, 12 and Thomas, *United States of Suburbia*, 37-38.

<sup>32</sup>Paul C. Ruth, “Modern Church Building Costs,” *Architectural Record* 100 (October 1946): 106; John W. Ragsdale, “We Will Build Modern Churches,” *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>33</sup>Sydney D. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 949-963.

<sup>34</sup>Paul C. Ruth, “Modern Church Building Costs,” 106; “The New Churches,” *Time* 66 (19 September 1955): 81.

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style. Wright's organic intent resulted in buildings that are evocative of place. In contrast, proponents of the International Style used industrially wrought materials such as steel and glass to create buildings that were purposefully designed to be appropriate to any environment. This dichotomy between Wright's organic architecture and the objectives of the International Style becomes clear when comparing Wright's work to that of the German-born architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Considering the Unitarian Meeting House and Mies' Chapel at the Illinois Institute of Technology at Chicago, completed in 1952, reveals fundamental differences in their approach. Mies' chapel is essentially a rectangular brick and glass cube with a pre-fabricated concrete roof. It is similar in its austerity to several of his signature works including the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois (1950), the towering apartment houses built on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago (1951) and the National Theater in Mannheim, Germany (1953). In these designs, Mies had attained "universal space," which "goes beyond functionalism by avoiding the limitations of any particular function or program."<sup>35</sup>

Wright's organic sensibility as expressed in the Unitarian Meeting House was more prominent in American ecclesiastic design following the war than was Mies' influence. In church design, the pervasive interest was in creating solutions that were responsive to the unique needs of the specific congregation both in terms of liturgy and symbol. Wright took this approach one step further and advocated that the building be specific to its site, built of materials secured locally if possible and specially oriented to the unique geographic features of its location. He imbued the Meeting House and his other churches with carefully considered abstractions, often reduced to a geometric element, but presented with an elaboration that fully developed his selected theological themes. As is frequently the case with the best of Wright's professional admirers, the organic spirit of his work has been adapted resulting in designs that are uniquely responsive to specific conditions and beliefs. Barry Byrne had worked for Wright in the Oak Park studio for several years beginning in 1902. His design for St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Kansas City was just about to be constructed when it was featured in the publication *Liturgical Arts* in November 1946. In an effort to create a design that results from the "unification of the aesthetic and functional parts," the architect sought to establish a harmonious relationship between the relatively small element of the altar and the width required of the nave. The solution was to narrow the church at both ends, which resulted in the plan taking on a fish-like shape, an important symbolic form in the Catholic faith.<sup>36</sup>

The Unitarian Meeting House also exemplified national church-building trends by including classroom, meeting and activity spaces. That church buildings provide other elements to accommodate the increasingly common use of churches as "community centers" became a widespread requirement, especially for suburban churches following the war. Although both urban and suburban churches tended to be much larger than the Unitarian Meeting House, Wright provided an early example of this type of spatial organization that was frequently repeated in the arrangement of a central auditorium or worship space with ancillary wings housing other functions. The Unitarians took special pride in taking a lead in constructing churches of this type. In 1948 the Unitarian publication, *The Christian Register*, noted that Unitarians from "one coast to another" were building the "church of the future...one where all the important activities of the community would be centered—forums, dances, youth canteen, lectures, book review nights, public discussions, basketball games, and so forth." Soon after the Meeting House had been completed it was put to use by members of the Shorewood Hills community for their annual holiday parties and the First Unitarian Society began operation of a nursery school.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Drexler, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1960), 30. Wright's Meeting House and Mies's chapel appeared together in several contemporary popular and professional publications; see "New Look for Churches: Church Design Goes Modern," *Popular Science* 165 (December 1954): 112-113, and Reinhard Gieselman, *New Churches* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1972), 20, 151.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Lavanoux, "Go West Young Man," *Liturgical Arts* 15 (November 1946), 12.

<sup>37</sup> "Unitarian Churches as Community Centers," *Christian Register* 127 (November 1948): 38-39.

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The Unitarian Meeting House represents an early example of a non-traditional post-World War II American church. It has made significant contributions to the broad national patterns of United States history for establishing an important prototype in the major redefinition of ecclesiastic architecture at the middle of the twentieth century. It was constructed at the advent of a major national effort to build suburban churches and is reflective of the religious sentiment that pervaded the country following the war. It is a design that has been recognized for its excellence nationally and internationally because it demonstrates the capacity of architecture to express spiritual values. In the Unitarian Meeting House, Wright adapted his unique architectural vocabulary to convey the specific religious symbolism of the Unitarians but in a language that touches the soul universally.

**Architectural Significance**

The Unitarian Meeting House was consistent with these national trends in church building following World War II and represented a leading example of the “new” suburban church. It was located outside the central urban mass and was designed as a multi-purpose ecclesiastic facility. Wright did not make use of traditional ecclesiastic form, such as Romanesque or Gothic, in designing the Meeting House, but rather presents an abstraction of color, texture and shape that gives expression to ideas reflective of his own theological heritage. Designing the Meeting House represented a highly personal exercise for Wright as the First Unitarian Society of Madison was a group with whom he had life-long ties. Although the building is reflective of his contemporary interests in architecture, it is also imbued with symbolism that evokes an earlier time in Wright’s career providing an architectural expression that is highly distinctive. The Meeting House is unique in another way for being an example of Wright’s Usonian architecture in a non-residential application. Usonian architecture was advanced by Wright following the establishment of the Taliesin Fellowship in 1932 as being appropriate to a middle-class semi-rural life style. Although the Meeting House was constructed just as widespread suburbanization was getting underway across the nation, Wright did not conceive of the building as a suburban church but rather as a “country church,” which is how he inscribed the initial design drawings. This annotation suggests that the actual theoretical context of the Meeting House was “Broadacre City,” a decentralized American community envisioned by Wright.

**Broadacre City: Wright’s Plan for Urban Decentralization**

By the time the Meeting House was designed, Wright had made his dislike of the trend toward suburbanization widely known, advocating instead a somewhat radical form of decentralization that would have emptied the cities and relocated most Americans to the countryside. With transportation and communication technology in place that enabled mobility of population and long-distance communication, Wright did not believe that there was any reason to continue to build the large metropolitan areas or to develop land in their immediate proximity. In fact, he strongly cautioned against it: “Any wise recognition and definition of freedom under democracy must say that ultimate human satisfaction no longer depends upon, but are destroyed by density of population.”<sup>38</sup> In the early 1930s, Wright began to promote a plan for urban decentralization, which he referred to alternately as “Broadacre City” and “Broadacres.” He advanced his planning ideas in lectures given at Yale in 1930 and expanded on his thoughts in *The Disappearing City* published in 1932. In 1935, Wright directed his apprentices to construct an architectural model illustrating a representative four-mile square of Broadacre City. The model, exhibited at the Industrial Arts Exposition at the Rockefeller Center in New York in April and May of 1935 and at several other venues in the United States and Europe, showed “the coordinated grouping of small farms, small factories, small homes, small schools, and small laboratories.” Wright advocated the dispersion of the population across the countryside into relatively small and autonomous but tightly interconnected communities.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City* (New York: New American Library, 1958, paperback edition 1970), 70.

<sup>39</sup>Frank Lloyd Wright, “Broadacre City: A New Community Plan,” *The Architectural Record* 77 (April 1935): 243-254.

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Wright called for the redistribution of social, cultural and economic elements to outside the cities and promoted his view that “the ideal community” would reflect “a general decentralization and architectural reintegration of all units into one fabric.” Wright believed decentralization was predicated upon three factors: “(1) The motor car: general mobilization of the human being. (2) Radio, telephone and telegraph: electrical intercommunication being complete. (3) Standardized machine-shop production: machine invention plus scientific discovery.” The plan offered architectural directives and provided authority to the architect as a governmental agent in place to oversee issues of planning and architectural design, which was to be informed ultimately by the natural environment. Wright wrote:

In the buildings of Broadacres no distinction exists between much and little, more and less. Quality is in all, for all, alike. The thought entering into the first or last estate is of the best. What differs is only individuality and extent. There is nothing poor or mean in Broadacres.

Nor does Broadacres issue any dictum or see any finality in the matter of either pattern or style.

Organic character is style. Such style has myriad forms inherently good. Growth is possible to Broadacres as a fundamental form: not as mere accident of change but as integral pattern folding from within.<sup>40</sup>

Wright’s Usonian architecture, with its implied regional variation, was developed as the general building type appropriate to the citizens of Broadacre City, and when the Unitarian Meeting House was conceived and constructed, it was done so within the context of Wright’s utopian plan for architecture and society. One Wright scholar has identified Broadacre City as “the chief work of Wright’s life . . . All of Wright’s late architectural achievements reflect the ideology of this project.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Usonian Design**

Concurrent with the refinement of the Broadacre City plans, Wright developed an interest in creating a new type of housing that he believed would be appropriate to his utopian community. Distinct from Wright’s earlier “Prairie” style, the hallmark of his Oak Park studio during the first decade of the twentieth century, Wright’s later Usonian buildings reflect his interest in affordable housing. The larger architectural context, as advocated by Wright, was a semi-rural life for most Americans. The term Usonian was Wright’s acronym for the United States of North America. Wright first used the word in his own writings in the 1920s, and between 1936 and 1959 it came to describe the type of organic architecture he supported as appropriate to Broadacre City. From 1936 on, Wright designed over 300 low- to moderate-cost Usonian residences, approximately 140 of which were built. They were constructed by middle-income families willing to forgo attics, basements, large bedrooms and formal dining rooms and to use a carport instead of a garage. The Usonian house was intended for a relaxed family lifestyle that included gardening and the maintenance of a relatively large parcel of land. The first such residence was constructed in Madison, Wisconsin between 1936 and 1937 for Herbert and Katherine Jacobs, who later were actively involved with the construction of the Unitarian Meeting House.<sup>42</sup>

The Unitarian Meeting House is an important and unique example of Wright’s late Usonian type of architecture in a non-residential application, and many characteristics of Wright’s Usonian houses find parallels in the Madison church. The expansive, essentially horizontal single-story plan of the church with its interconnected public spaces corresponds to the living/dining and kitchen group in Usonian residential designs. Similarly, the education wing corresponds to the more private bedroom wing, and the off-center, somewhat concealed primary

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 244, 246.

<sup>41</sup>John Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian Houses, Designs for Moderate Cost One-Family Homes*, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1984), 121.

<sup>42</sup>For Usonian design, see Alvin Rosenbaum, *Usonia: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Design for America* (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1993) and John Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian Houses*.

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entrance of the church is typical not only of Usonian designs but nearly all of Wright's residential work. Integrally colored concrete floors were a standard feature of Wright's Usonian buildings; these were typically inscribed with the geometric planning grid that was used in designing the building. Wright routinely used grids for Usonian houses, and beginning around the mid-to-late 1930s departed from rectangular grids and began experimenting with more complex triangular variations and later circular and elliptical forms. Several designs that date from 1928 and 1929, including an early house scheme for his cousin Richard Lloyd Jones in Tulsa and the project for San Marcos in the Desert in Chandler, Arizona were laid out on a diamond grid. However, diamond, triangle and hexagon grids are most often found in Wright's work from the 1940s and 50s.<sup>43</sup> Although the Unitarian Meeting House was located similarly to many of the suburban churches that would be constructed over the next decade, it was built at a significantly smaller scale than many of its near contemporaries. The Auditorium and its support spaces were designed for a congregation of approximately 125. Still anticipating the realization of a way of life informed by the ideology of decentralization, Wright's church reflected his view that the building would exist to support a low-density population. Wright's very conscious effort to create an informal church replicated this dominant characteristic of his Usonian houses. In an article published soon after Wright began his work with the First Unitarian Society, he publicly posed the question, "Must church architecture be starched stiff as a hard collar and the symbols of worship be no more inspiring than a black bow tie or a pair of suspenders?" As an alternative, Wright advocated, "A pleasant well-proportioned room in human scale with a big fireplace and a plain table for flowers and the Book—the sky pilot on the floor with his flock—the whole business bright with sun a wide prospect. I say, let down the too tidy moral tone of the regulation from all concert pitch and relax the whole thing." The late architectural historian Walter Creese recently observed, "what I find superior in the Unitarian Meeting House . . . is the absence of any pomp, stiffer hierarchy and heavier monumentality. He [Wright] domesticated religion to where the church seems almost a house, it has that much intimacy. Yet it never quite loses its religious symbolism. It is a true house of worship."<sup>44</sup>

Several features of the Meeting House perpetuate elements Wright had introduced in his earlier work. The low hip roofs, tawny limestone walls and horizontal bands of windows evoke a timeless quality, repeating elements found in Wright's own Taliesin near Spring Green. The hand-lettered Persian proverb inscribed across the Auditorium balcony and six names placed around the Hearth Room dome are consistent with the similar use of inscriptions found in Wright's work dating between 1889 and 1905 and include his Oak Park home, Unity Temple (Oak Park), second Hillside Home School (near Spring Green), and Larkin Administration Building (Buffalo). Hand carved or lettered inscriptions appear only rarely in his work thereafter. The same comparison applies to closing off halls or rooms with full-height draperies that in the Meeting House are primarily decorative but before the use of central heating served a functional purpose: to hold in heat and keep out cold drafts.<sup>45</sup>

Although consistent in nearly all ways with the stylistic characteristics of the Usonian buildings, the Meeting House is considered among several other non-residential structures as having been the "boldest buildings of his

<sup>43</sup>For a discussion of Wright's more typical use of symmetrical plans for large-scale buildings, see Paul Kruty, *Midway Gardens* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 166-69. For changes in building materials between the 1930s and 1940s, see William Storrer, *Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 241; the Smith House (p. 297) was one of the last board-and-batten Usonians, and the Miller Residence (p. 299) has stone laid in a manner similar to the Meeting House. For Usonian characteristics, see Storrer, 218-19, 241, and 273; other Usonian buildings also used diamond grids, particularly the Friedman Vacation Lodge (p. 296), J. Willis Hughes House (p. 316), and designs for Parkwyn Village (p. 311).

<sup>44</sup>The Frank Lloyd Wright quotations are from "Starched Churches," in *Collected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 298 (originally published in *Christian Register*, August 1946). Walter Creese to Anne Biebel, 20 December 2001, Isthmus Architecture project files.

<sup>45</sup>Unity Chapel, the small, shingle-style building erected near Spring Green, also featured a large room divided by a curtain, and the building served as a social center for the small rural community. The Meeting House inscription reads, "Do you have a loaf of bread break the loaf in two and give half for some flowers of the Narcissus for the bread feeds the body indeed but the flowers feed the soul."

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[Wright's] career." The Meeting House, while representing the over-riding objectives that dominated his late career, also finds kinship with others of Wright's late non-residential buildings for redefining an architectural type. Instead of using a series of individual connecting galleries for the Solomon Guggenheim Museum (1943-1959) in New York, for example, Wright proposed a quarter mile sloping ramp encircling a cylindrical domed space from which works of art could be viewed up close or at a distance across the empty space. For the S.C. Johnson Research Tower (1945-50) in Racine, Wright rejected the prevailing steel-frame and curtain wall model for tall skyscrapers, relying instead on the trunk, root and branches of a tree as the model for a fifteen-story, cantilevered structure with the square and circular floors supported on a thirteen-foot shaft that descended like a taproot more than forty feet below the ground.<sup>46</sup>

**Wright's Ecclesiastic Design**

During Wright's long career he designed some twenty-six chapels, churches and synagogues of which the Meeting House and ten others were constructed. Besides spanning Wright's entire career and showing considerable variety in the use of materials, his designs for religious structures also varied in the type, size, locale and the symbolism incorporated to reflect his clients' religious denominations. The range included small memorial chapels at cemeteries, mortuaries and family properties in Illinois, California and Wisconsin, a hotel wedding chapel in California, and chapels for a seminary and college campuses in Florida, Arizona and Oklahoma. The earliest and one of the smallest was the Lloyd Jones' Unity Chapel, a Shingle-style structure designed by Joseph L. Silsbee and capable of holding at most 100 people. It was built in 1886 next to the family cemetery and, as the story has it, Wright as "the boy architect" oversaw the completion of the interior. Full-size churches were constructed in Iowa, Florida, California, Illinois, Arizona and Wisconsin. Wright's twenty-six designs included structures for congregations affiliated with the Catholic, Christian Science, and Congregational, as well as Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Methodist, Unitarian and Universalist denominations. When asked how he could provide appropriate designs for such a broad range of religious groups Wright replied, "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."<sup>47</sup>

Two religious structures designed nearly six decades apart illustrate how Wright responded to religious congregations with differing liturgical and physical needs. He designed Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois after the Universalists' church burned in the summer of 1905. Their concern with budget and desire that the replacement church be fireproof helps to explain Wright's use of concrete as the primary material. In Unity Temple, the visual density of the concrete sealed off the view from the church to the noisy and cramped urban corner lot, but Wright designed the building to allow natural light to enter through narrow clerestory bands atop the unadorned walls and a massive skylight comprised of multiple clear and colored glass panels. In the design of Unity Temple Wright utilized the square and cube in laying out the floor plan, establishing the form of the major spaces and providing a decorative motif repeated in exterior cast ornamentation, the skylight and the interior furnishings. The three levels of seating in the auditorium are positioned so that the congregation faces each other as well as the minister, an arrangement that creates a sense of community. An entirely different theological approach is reflected in the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin nearly fifty years later. Unlike the churches for his Unitarian and Universalist clients, the primary assembly room in the Greek Orthodox Church is reserved entirely for religious services, and a part of that space is set off with an icon screen denoting its sanctity. Wright again used concrete as the primary building material and based the design on a single geometric shape, this time the circle, a form with strong religious associations for the Eastern

<sup>46</sup>The quotation is from Robert Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright: His Life and Architecture* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 336. Of the seventeen designs selected by the AIA, nine were non-residential buildings designed during his later career.

<sup>47</sup>For a complete list of Wright's unrealized projects and constructed buildings (including the 26 churches), see Robert McCarter, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 344-59. The "boy architect" quotation is from William C. Gannett, "Christening a Country Church," *Unity* 17 (28 August 1886): 356-57.



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Orthodox faith. Wright used the circle in combination with another highly symbolic image, the Greek cross, and these two elements, alone or in combination, determined the functional and decorative features of the Milwaukee church, including the position and shape of the shallow blue dome. While Wright and his family were affiliated with the Unitarian and Universalist churches in Madison and Oak Park, his wife, Olgivanna, had attended a Serbian Orthodox church as a child. Familiar with the symbols and traditions of her heritage, she would have known about the importance of placing the sanctuary in the east, providing a wide center door and an aisle wide enough to accommodate processions, and a room for the distribution and display of candles, none of which would have been important to Unitarians.<sup>48</sup>

Designing the Unitarian Meeting House provided Wright the opportunity to express, in architectural symbol and form, the religious beliefs that he had been exposed to as a child and continued to draw upon throughout his adult life. As “unity” was a pervasive theme in his architecture, so the idea of “unity” was intrinsic to the principles of the Unitarians. “Unitarians,” Wright noted, “believe in the unity of all things. Well, I tried to build a building here that expressed that over-all sense of unity.”<sup>49</sup> Wright imbued the Meeting House with symbolism, but without following the traditional precedents employed by many other religious denominations. He included no altar, cross or figurative imagery of any kind and the only inspirational inscription, located on the back balcony, was not from the Bible. He dismissed the tradition of depicting religious figures and stories in sculpted reliefs, stained glass windows or three-dimensional figures applied to the exterior and interior of a church. Instead, Wright sought to make the Madison church itself expressive of the Unitarian denomination’s beliefs.

His efforts were not lost to the ministers leading the society. In the Unitarian Meeting House, Wright merged the three familiar elements of a church—the chapel, spire and parish hall into a single unified form. Rev. Kenneth Patton, the minister who worked with Wright in the early stages of designing the church, described Wright’s intentions concerning various design aspects of the Meeting House. In 1947 Patton wrote,

As he [Wright] looked upon traditional church architecture, he found it to be composed of three units: the steeple which pointed toward the heavens, the auditorium for worship or “holy” purposes, and the secular part of the church which he says might be referred to as the “stomach” of the building. In a “unit-arian” church there should be organic unity of function as well as structure, so all three of these previously disunited parts of the building are gathered into one unit, which serves as a spire, auditorium and general purpose parish “living room” in one.<sup>50</sup>

Rev. Max Gaebler, who became the minister of the First Unitarian Society in 1952, commented on symbolic and emotional qualities the combination Auditorium and Hearth Room evoke. Rev. Gaebler wrote: “The utter simplicity of the assembly room is friendly, not austere. The large clear glass areas, the warm colors, the closeness of the congregation to the pulpit—all this helps to create an atmosphere of directness and honesty, with no barriers of false formalism interposed between minister and congregation....Mr. Wright has caught the spirit of liberal religion and has given it architectural embodiment.”<sup>51</sup> Noting the dictum of a well-known religious historian that “every house of worship reflects in microcosm the view of the universe held by the congregation that inhabits it,” John Hayward, a distinguished Unitarian scholar, observed that the diagonal thrust of the Auditorium ceiling represented the collective Unitarian spirit that was “forever searching and

<sup>48</sup>Like the Madison Unitarians, the Milwaukee congregation first considered urban sites but then selected a 1.5-acre parcel in suburban Wauwatosa, for which Wright produced his initial design in 1956. For the Unity Temple, see Joseph Siry, *Unity Temple: Frank Lloyd Wright and Architecture for Liberal Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, see John Gurda, *New World Odyssey: Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church and Frank Lloyd Wright* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Hellenic Community Center, 1986).

<sup>49</sup>Frank Lloyd Wright, television interview by Hugh Downs, 17 May 1953, transcript in Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Future of Architecture*, 23.

<sup>50</sup>Kenneth Patton, “The Church of Tomorrow,” *Christian Register* 126 (June 1947): 241, 268.

<sup>51</sup>“First Unitarian Church, Madison, Wisconsin. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect,” *Architectural Forum* 97 (December 1952): 86.

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seeking for the higher and more inclusive vision,” while the lower ceiling of the Hearth Room “implies a home-like atmosphere . . . retaining its firm anchorage in history and tradition.”<sup>52</sup> Wright wrote about the Meeting House, “Unity—the ideal of Unitarianism appears in Madison. . . a structure preaching what the congregation professes to believe. In concrete form—the Unitarian ideal.”<sup>53</sup> Wright’s choice of the triangle as the principal geometric design element alluded to Unitarian tradition and so, to Wright the shape symbolized unity and aspiration. “As the square has always signified integrity and the sphere universality,” he said, “the triangle stands for aspiration.” “The Plan [of the Meeting House],” he said, “is triangular. The roof is triangular and out of this triangulation you get this expression of reverence without recourse to the steeple. The building itself . . . says what the steeple used to say, but says it with greater reverence . . . in both form and structure.”<sup>54</sup>

**“In Every Way *His* Church”**

The First Unitarian Society of Madison is a group with which Wright had long-term close personal ties. The formative years that Wright had spent in Madison, where he moved with his family in 1878 and where he resided until early 1887, were beneath the wing of his mother’s Lloyd Jones siblings, an extended family of resolute Unitarians who resided outside of Madison near Spring Green. During summers, he frequently was sent to work on their farms (some of it land he would eventually acquire and call “Taliesin”). Wright’s initial involvement with the Madison Unitarian Society not only dates from the inception of the organization in 1879 but his uncle, Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, was instrumental in establishing the society in Madison. It was in his capacity as the state missionary secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference that Jones played a major role in organizing a permanent group in the city. Wright’s father, William Wright, served as the first secretary of the First Unitarian Society, and his mother, Anna Lloyd Jones Wright, taught Sunday school and served as an officer in the women’s group. As a youth, Wright attended the Unitarian Sunday school and later participated in the church-sponsored “Contemporary Club.” In 1886, Wright undoubtedly watched with interest the construction of the Madison society’s first church located in downtown Madison approximately six blocks from where his family lived. The stone structure, the church for which the future architect would later design a replacement, was designed by the well-known Boston firm of Peabody and Stearns.<sup>55</sup>

During the years of his Oak Park practice, Wright maintained a close association with his uncle Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones who was then based in Chicago. Wright and his family were affiliated with the Universalist church for which he designed Unity Temple. Following Wright’s 1911 return to Wisconsin, he reestablished ties with members of the First Unitarian Society of Madison, and after founding the Taliesin Fellowship in 1932 Wright frequently invited the society’s ministers and members to speak at Unity Chapel where his Taliesin apprentices

<sup>52</sup>The “microcosm” quotation is by Mircea Eliade; it and the comments by John Hayward are from Max Gaebler, “Unitarianism in the Life and Work of Frank Lloyd Wright,” in Max Gaebler, *Landmarks in the Life of the First Unitarian Society in Madison* (Madison: First Unitarian Society, 1999), 64-65.

<sup>53</sup>Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Frank Lloyd Wright Drawings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 94.

<sup>54</sup>Wright’s quotation on the triangle is from “Anarchy in Our Churches,” *Architectural Forum* 88 (December 1952): 86. Wright’s remarks on the triangular structure of the Meeting House is from his interview with Hugh Downs transcript in *Future of Architecture*, p. 23. Although Wright spoke primarily of the triangle, the diamond, comprised of two triangles, is the more dominant form in the Meeting House. A society member noted, “The floor slab of the Meeting House is itself a huge diamond sixteen times larger than the diamonds that one sees scored into the floor. And the roof is the same slab after it is hoisted into the sky . . . Wright discovered that he could break and fold the diamond and push its points up to create elevations that were structurally rigid [so that] . . . they would stand on their own.” Once he creased the diamond along its centerline, Wright folded [the diamond] over and over again onto itself creating . . . new polygon forms.” Herman Felstehausen to Mary Jane Hamilton, 30 September 2002, project files.

<sup>55</sup>Organizational meetings of the Unitarian group were held in late 1878 and the congregation was formally established in 1879. Before moving to Madison, William Wright had been a Baptist minister but left that denomination to follow the Unitarian beliefs of his wife’s family. While living in Madison, William Wright operated a musical conservatory and served as Unitarian minister to several small, generally rural congregations near Madison; he also served as secretary to the Western Unitarian Conference. See Hamilton, *The Unitarian Meeting House*, for a photograph of the 1886 church and Merle Curti, “Our Golden Age,” in Gaebler, *Landmarks*, 7-23 for a good historical overview of the congregation.

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convened for weekly Sunday services. Although having signed the membership book of the First Unitarian Society in 1938, Wright was not an active member of the congregation at the time he secured the commission to design the Meeting House. Nonetheless, the First Unitarian Society of Madison was a group with whom the architect shared deeply ingrained spiritual beliefs. Members of Wright's extended family, specifically several of his Lloyd Jones cousins who resided in the area (including, for a time, Jenkin's son Richard) had been members of the First Unitarian Society, broadening Wright's ties to include multiple generations.<sup>56</sup>

Wright was 79 years old when he secured the Meeting House commission and turned 84 in 1951 as construction was being completed. The post-war period, coinciding with just over the last decade of Wright's life, was his most prolific for the number of commissions he secured, the greatest diversity of building locations and largest number of major public commissions. Following World War II he obtained commissions in this country and abroad for museums, churches, opera houses, civic centers and university buildings. Even with the demands on his time and advancing years, Wright was involved to a very high degree in the design and construction of the Unitarian Meeting House. The building represents a highly personal expression of Wright's faith and provides the premier example of the Usonian church into which Wright has also integrated elements that evoke earlier times in his life.

Presumably to underscore his family's deep long-standing connection to the church, Wright had his uncle's name inscribed with those of five other Unitarian notables on the oak fascia at the base of the domical opening in the Hearth Room ceiling. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the only Midwesterner in the group, was publicly elevated by his nephew to the stature of such great nineteenth century thinkers as Charles William Elliot, Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Following the completion of the building, Wright returned to the church many times and on several occasions spoke from the pulpit, "preaching in that church as his uncle and other relatives had in Unity Chapel" observed Rev. Gaebler, who also recalled the many impromptu stops made by Wright to the Madison church, simply to "experience the building yet again." On such occasions, "Wright would sit quietly for a few moments on one of the benches, then go up to the prow and gaze out towards Lake Mendota over what was then a cornfield managed by the College of Agriculture. . . . At such moments there could be no question of his special attachment to that place. It was in every way *his church*."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Those who spoke to Wright's apprentices included ministers Rupert Holloway and Kenneth Patton and society members and UW-Madison professors Max Otto and Harold Groves. Richard Lloyd Jones lived in Madison from 1911 to 1919, during which time he served as editor and publisher of the *Wisconsin State Journal*; he later moved to Tulsa where he erected a house designed by his cousin. Lloyd Jones cousins who remained in the city much longer were Thomas and Chester Lloyd Jones and their families.

<sup>57</sup> Max Gaebler, "Unitarianism in the Life and Work of Frank Lloyd Wright," 65, emphasis added.

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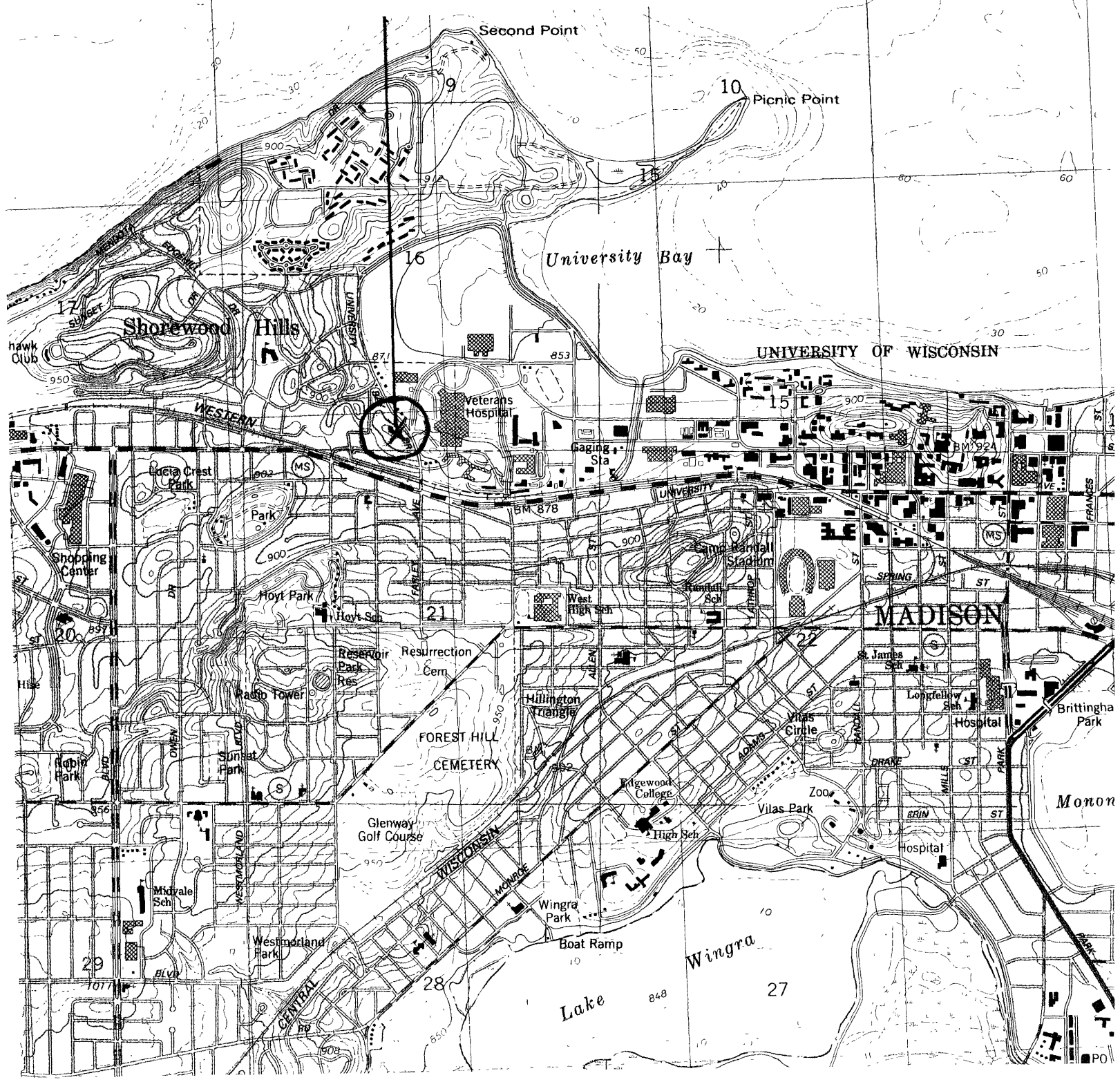
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ELEVATION 849

FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY MEETING HOUSE  
Village of Shorewood Hills, Wisconsin  
UTM Coordinate

Zone 16

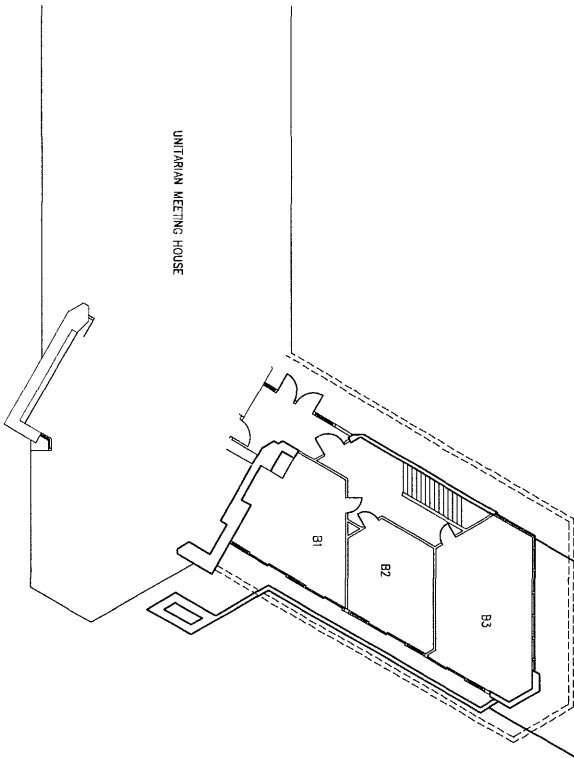
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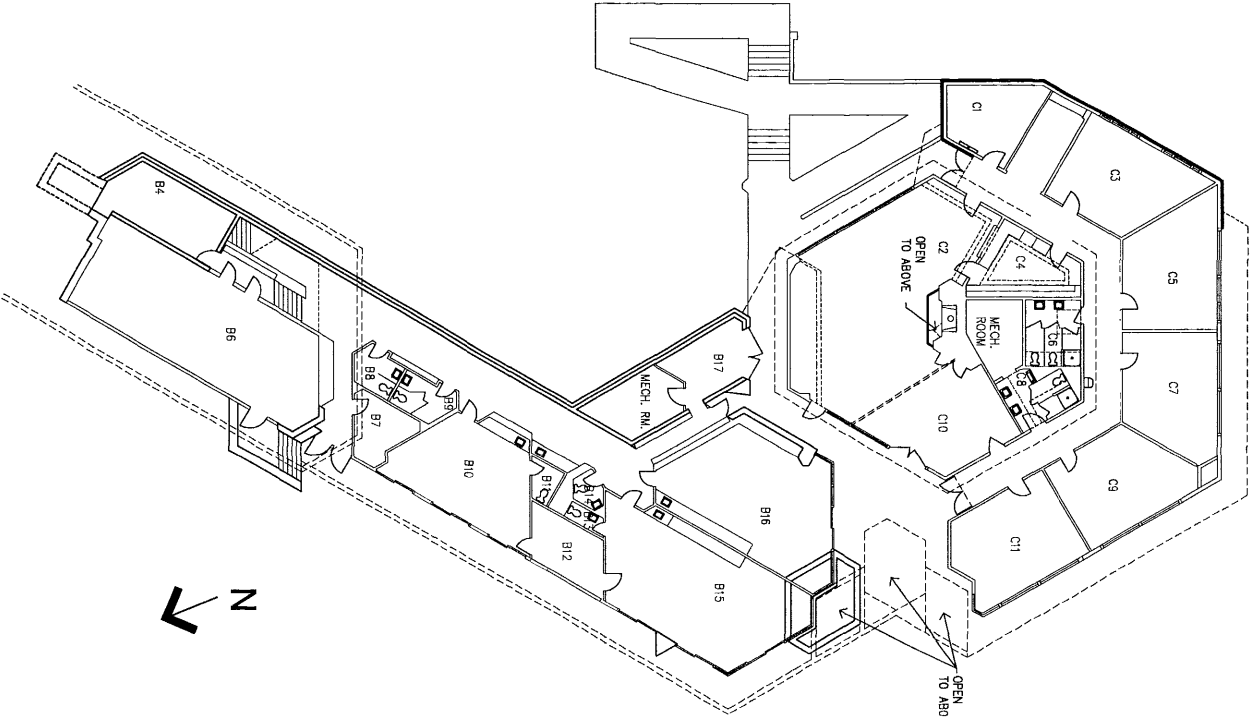


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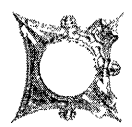
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- B6 OFFICE
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- B8 UNISEX TOILET
- B9 UNISEX TOILET
- B10 CLASSROOM
- B11 UNISEX TOILET
- B12 STORAGE
- B13 UNISEX TOILET
- B14 UNISEX TOILET
- B15 CLASSROOM
- B16 CLASSROOM
- B17 STORAGE
- C1 MECHANICAL ROOM
- C2 GATHERING ROOM
- C3 CLASSROOM
- C4 KITCHEN
- C5 CLASSROOM
- C6 WOMEN'S TOILET
- C7 CLASSROOM
- C8 MEN'S TOILET
- C9 CLASSROOM
- C10 AUDITORIUM
- C11 CLASSROOM



**1 BUILDING B, UPPER FLOOR PLAN**  
NOT TO SCALE



**2 BUILDINGS B & C, LOWER FLOOR PLAN**  
NOT TO SCALE

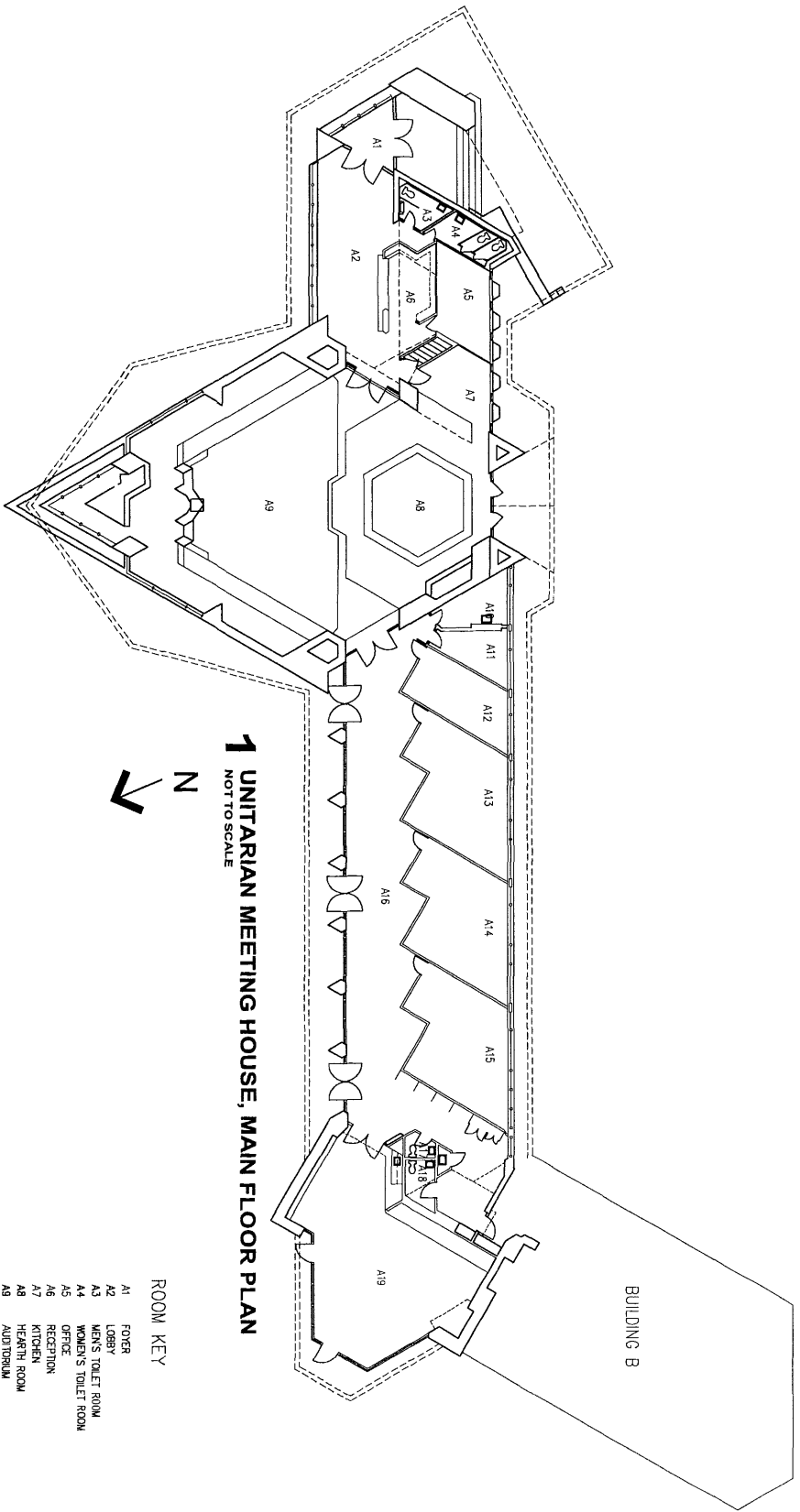


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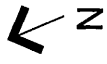
UNITARIAN  
MEETING  
HOUSE  
Madison, WI

Project	Unitarian Meeting House
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Sheet 1 of 1



**1 UNITARIAN MEETING HOUSE, MAIN FLOOR PLAN**  
 NOT TO SCALE



**ROOM KEY**

- A1 Foyer
- A2 Lobby
- A3 Men's Toilet Room
- A4 Women's Toilet Room
- A5 Office
- A6 Reception
- A7 Kitchen
- A8 Hearth Room
- A9 Auditorium
- A10 Custom./Storage
- A11 Office
- A12 Minister
- A13 Office
- A14 Gender Library
- A15 Religious Education
- A16 Lockup Corridor
- A17 Unisex Toilet Room
- A18 ADA Unisex Toilet Room
- A19 West Living Room

**2 UNITARIAN MEETING HOUSE, BASEMENT PLAN**  
 NOT TO SCALE

