

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE: Illinois	
COUNTY: Cook	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE

1. NAME

COMMON:

Unity Temple

AND/OR HISTORIC:

Unity Church

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER:

895 Lake Street
Southeast corner of Lake Street and Kenilworth Avenue

CITY OR TOWN:

Oak Park

STATE

Illinois 60302

CODE

COUNTY:

Cook

CODE

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
☐ District ☐ Site ☐ Object	☐ Public ☒ Private ☐ Both	☒ Occupied ☐ Unoccupied ☐ Preservation work in progress	Yes: ☒ Restricted ☐ Unrestricted ☐ No

PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

☐ Agricultural	☐ Government	☐ Park	☐ Transportation	☐ Comments
☐ Commercial	☐ Industrial	☐ Private Residence	☐ Other (Specify)	
☐ Educational	☐ Military	☒ Religious		
☐ Entertainment	☐ Museum	☐ Scientific		

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME:

Unitarian Universalist Church

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:

Oak Park

STATE:

Illinois 60302

CODE

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC:

Cook County Recorder's Office

STREET AND NUMBER:

Cook County Building

CITY OR TOWN:

Chicago

STATE

Illinois

CODE

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY:

Historic American Buildings Survey (Seven sheets)

DATE OF SURVEY:

1967

☒ Federal☐ State☐ County☐ Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:

Prints and Photograph Division, Library of Congress

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:

Washington

STATE:

D. C.

CODE

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

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COUNTY:

ENTRY NUMBER

DATE

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7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION	(Check One)					
	☒ Excellent	☐ Good	☐ Fair	☐ Deteriorated	☐ Ruins	☐ Unexposed
	(Check One)			(Check One)		
	☒ Altered	☐ Unaltered	☐ Moved	☒ Original Site		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Unity Temple is a massive T-shaped reinforced concrete structure 142 feet long on its main axis. It is divided into three visually expressed functional units of varying heights: the dominating cubical Temple or auditorium at the northern end, a lower, rectangular social hall (Unity House) at the southern end, and a still lower entrance hall which serves as a connecting link between the two major volumes. The Temple is square in plan, 64 feet in width and length, and 47 feet high. The corners are occupied by stair towers which serve to define a cruciform interior space, the cruciform shape being apparent from the outside only at the clerestory level but accentuated at that level by the widely projecting planes of the concrete slab roof. Above the roof level is a square "attic", actually a parapet wall concealing a large skylight, which covers the square central space of the auditorium. Unity House is 91½ feet by 50 feet in size with its major axis set at right angles to the Temple. The two main sections of the building are connected by the central two-story entrance hall, 30 feet long and 24 feet wide. Visual unity is enhanced by the terraces and freestanding lateral walls which extend north from Unity House across both fronts of the entrance hall and along the sides of the Temple section. The clear definition of the two main functional spaces of the building is well stated in the large inscription in the wall above the entrance door: "For the worship of God and the service of man."

Both the Temple and Unity House are lighted by means of large skylights and glass ceilings. A crown of windows extends around the Temple below the broad projecting roof slab. With the exception of these and narrow window slits set deeply into recesses between the cruciform mass and the corner stair towers, the Temple walls are unbroken by penetrations to the interior except on the south side, where the only doors open into the entrance hall. This enhances the effect of solidity appropriate to the massive nature of concrete as a building material. The quiet surfaces and unbroken lines impart a great sense of dignity and monumentality to the structure, which achieves an almost Egyptian sense of monumentality and permanence. The massive unbroken exterior walls also serve to shut out the traffic noises of Lake Street, the major commercial street of Oak Park, on which ran a busy trolley line in 1906. At the height of 22 feet each wall of the Temple is recessed to carry six square columns that support the roof. These columns bear integrally molded ornament, consistent with Wright's aversion to applied decoration. This ornament is in contrast to and is set off by the severity of the lower portion of the facade. The exterior of the Temple was originally finished with an exposed aggregate of tan pebbles. By 1961 this surface had weathered severely and had broken in several places, due to the expansion of rusted reinforcing rods. At that time it was refinished with a smooth coat of grey concrete. The smaller mass of Unity House is treated in similar fashion to the Temple with unbroken corner elements and lower walls, square piers in the upper central section of the east and west walls, and a thick, broadly projecting concrete slab roof topped by a parapet screening a skylight.

Continued

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- ☐ Pre-Columbian | ☐ 16th Century | ☐ 18th Century | ☒ 20th Century
☐ 15th Century | ☐ 17th Century | ☐ 19th Century

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known)

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| ☐ Aboriginal | ☐ Education | ☐ Political | ☐ Urban Planning |
| ☐ Prehistoric | ☐ Engineering | ☐ Religion/Philosophy | ☐ Other (Specify) _____ |
| ☐ Historic | ☐ Industry | ☐ Science | _____ |
| ☐ Agriculture | ☐ Invention | ☐ Sculpture | _____ |
| ☒ Architecture | ☐ Landscape | ☐ Social/Humanitarian | _____ |
| ☐ Art | ☐ Literature | ☐ Theater | _____ |
| ☐ Commerce | ☐ Military | ☐ Transportation | _____ |
| ☐ Communications | ☐ Music | | |
| ☐ Conservation | | | |

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Designed by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) in 1905 and erected in 1906-07, Unity Temple is of major importance in the development of American and world architecture for two reasons. It is the first monumentally expressed use of reinforced concrete in world architecture. Its form, finish, and decoration all expressed the nature of concrete as a massive, moldable material and raised its use from that of a cheap structural material which had been hidden from view by conventionally applied decoration to that of an artistic architectural medium. Secondly, it is a prime and early example of modern church architecture. Unity Temple makes a sharp break with the 18th and 19th century traditions of ecclesiastical architecture and illustrates a masterly architectural rethinking and solution to old religious problems stated in terms at once esthetically creative and effectively functional, both as to structural and liturgical needs. In his manipulation of the geometry of the cube and square and of material in the design of this church, Wright created both a notable new architectural form and a strong material statement of the radically new architectural philosophy then emerging - that form must fit the function, that a building must be adapted to the uses to which it is to be put and should express those uses in its form.

History of Unity Temple

Frank Lloyd Wright, his mother, and sisters were members of the Oak Park Universalist Church when the original wood church structure burned down in June, 1905. After extensive consideration by the building committee, Wright was commissioned to design the present Unity Temple. A site, 100 feet wide and 170 feet deep and located at a busy intersection, and \$45,000 were available for this purpose. Following his principal that the form must fit the function, or, that the building should be adapted to the uses to which it is to be put and should express those uses in form, Wright set to work and by September completed the plans for a modern church without steeple. The structure was to be divided into three sections, the first for worship, the second for social activity, and the third, a central entrance hall, which would also link the other sections into an architectural whole. He began his design with the room for worship, which he conceived of as a square. The size of the square was

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Architecture, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Baltimore, 1963), 321-324.

Henry-Russell Hitchcock, In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1887-1941 (New York, 1942), 35, 39, 49, 53-4, 59, 64, 102.

Lewis Mumford, The Brown Decades (Boston, 1955), 166-174.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY			OR	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES		
CORNER	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE		LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	
	Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds		Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds	
NW	° ' "	° ' "		41° 53' 18"	87° 47' 49"	
NE	° ' "	° ' "				
SE	° ' "	° ' "				
SW	° ' "	° ' "				

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: .4 acre (17,000 square feet)

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME AND TITLE: Charles W. Snell, Survey Historian		
ORGANIZATION	Division of History, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service	DATE 3/3/70
STREET AND NUMBER: 801 19th Street, N. W.		
CITY OR TOWN: Washington	STATE D. C.	CODE

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

National ☐ State ☐ Local ☐

Name _____

Title _____

Date _____

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

Chief, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Date _____

ATTEST:

Keeper of The National Register

Date _____

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7. Description - Continued

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The functional duality of the Temple and Unity House is further expressed in the architectural treatment of the entrance hall, simple and open in contrast to the robust massiveness of the larger building elements. The sequence of entry into the building begins with a low, broad flight of steps to either side of the Temple. These steps lead south to terraces defined by high freestanding lateral walls extending from the steps back (south) to the mass of Unity House. From each terrace three sets of leaded glass doors with a total width of 30 feet open into the entrance hall itself. This opens, in turn, into the Temple and Unity House. The windowless second story of the entrance hall contains a choir practice room, trustees' room and pastor's study.

The interior of the Temple is in the shape of a Greek cross defined from the square building mass by the corner stair towers. Three arms of the cross are occupied by depressed "cloisters" and double galleries, and the fourth (or south side), by the pulpit platform and the organ. The large square crossing area is a skylit cube which contains the main seating area of the church. Four large square piers, located near each corner of the nave, screen the stairways in the corners, support the floors of the galleries, and carry the roof. The main floor is four feet above that of the entrance hall. Entry to it is gained through the "cloisters" in the east and west arms of the cross, the floors of which are level with the entrance hall and, therefore, depressed from the auditorium. These lead to the rear stair towers which, in turn, open into the galleries. The cloister entries provide a visual "entry" into the church before permitting a physical one; the staggering of floor levels permits a large seating capacity and monumental effect of two galleries around three sides of a small, intimately scaped space. The seating capacity of the Temple is 400 but because of the division of interior spaces it does not give a feeling of undue emptiness when far fewer people are in attendance. The main exits from the Temple are double doors on either side of the pulpit opening into the entrance hall. Comprised of heavy concrete slabs, these were designed solely as exits. They push outward, easily from the auditorium but have no doorknobs and thus cannot be pulled open from the entrance hall. On the outside they are treated as hidden doors, unframed and with the decorative moldings of the entrance hall crossing them and ignoring their existence. Thus entrance through the cloisters is enforced and exit is achieved by bringing the people forward, toward pastor and pulpit, rather than toward the rear as had been conventional.

The major source of natural light is the skylight, with leaded amber glass ceiling below. The glass in the latter is placed in the spaces between the concrete ceiling beams. This is supplemented by the continuous crown of windows in the walls above the upper gallery.

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8. Significance - Continued

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determined by the area required to comfortably seat, with leg-room, 400 people. The square plan for the room was then carried up vertically into a cube and all four elevations were to be symmetrical and comprised of flat planes and straight lines. The initial simple starting idea was then skillfully elaborated into an extremely complex space design with many variations that is echoed and adapted in the other two sections of the structure. By March, 1906 Wright had decided to use concrete, then a new construction material as yet little utilized in architecture. Concrete was cheap and he adapted the material to the form. The symmetrical elevations made it possible to reuse the wooden forms in pouring the large cantilever slabs for each facade and his omission of the usual brick or stone facings also saved money, making it possible for Wright to build a monumental building economically from limited funds.

Construction began in June, 1906. The decision to use concrete, however, caused serious delays in construction, for Unity Temple was one of the first major buildings in the United States to be built of this material. The church was finally completed in 1907 and the first services were held in October, 1908.

The structure underwent major repair and renovation in 1961. In this work the original pebble aggregate surfaces of the exterior concrete walls, by then badly broken by the weather, were completely resurfaced with a concrete that is smoother and warmer than the original surfaces. The 1906-07 interior buff color scheme of the church's auditorium was also replaced by one utilizing several brighter colors. Except for these alterations, Unity Temple retains its original form and material intact.

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9. Major Bibliographical References - Continued page 1

Thomas E. Tallmadge, The Story of Architecture in America (London, 1928), 229.

Fiske Kimball, American Architecture (Indianapolis, 1928), 195-96.

James M. Fitch, American Building, The Forces That Shape It (Boston, 1948), 221, 225.

John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America, A Social and Cultural History (Boston and Toronto, 1961), 237, 286-87, 294, 335, 373, 452, 471.

Carl W. Condit, The Chicago School of Architecture (Chicago and London, 1964), 200, 208-09.

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E. Kaufman and B. Raeburn, editors, Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings (New York, 1960), 74-83.

Grant C. Manson, Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910 (New York, 1958), 158-162.

H. T. Wijdeveld, editor, The Life Work of the American Architect, Frank Lloyd Wright (Amsterdam, 1925).

Frank Lloyd Wright, An Autobiography (New York, 1943), 153-161.

Frank Lloyd Wright, A Testament (New York, 1957), 66-67, 224-25, 131-32.

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J. Carson Webster, Architecture of Chicago and Vicinity (Society of Architectural Historians, August, 1965), 39-44.

Frederick Koeper, Illinois Architecture From Territorial Times to the Present, A Selective Guide (Chicago and London, 1968), 204.

Illinois, A Descriptive and Historical Guide (American Guide Series) (Revised edition, Chicago, 1946), 511.

James G. Van Derpool, "Historical Development of Architecture in the U.S.A., 1632-1912," (N.P.S. Typescript, 1966), 163.

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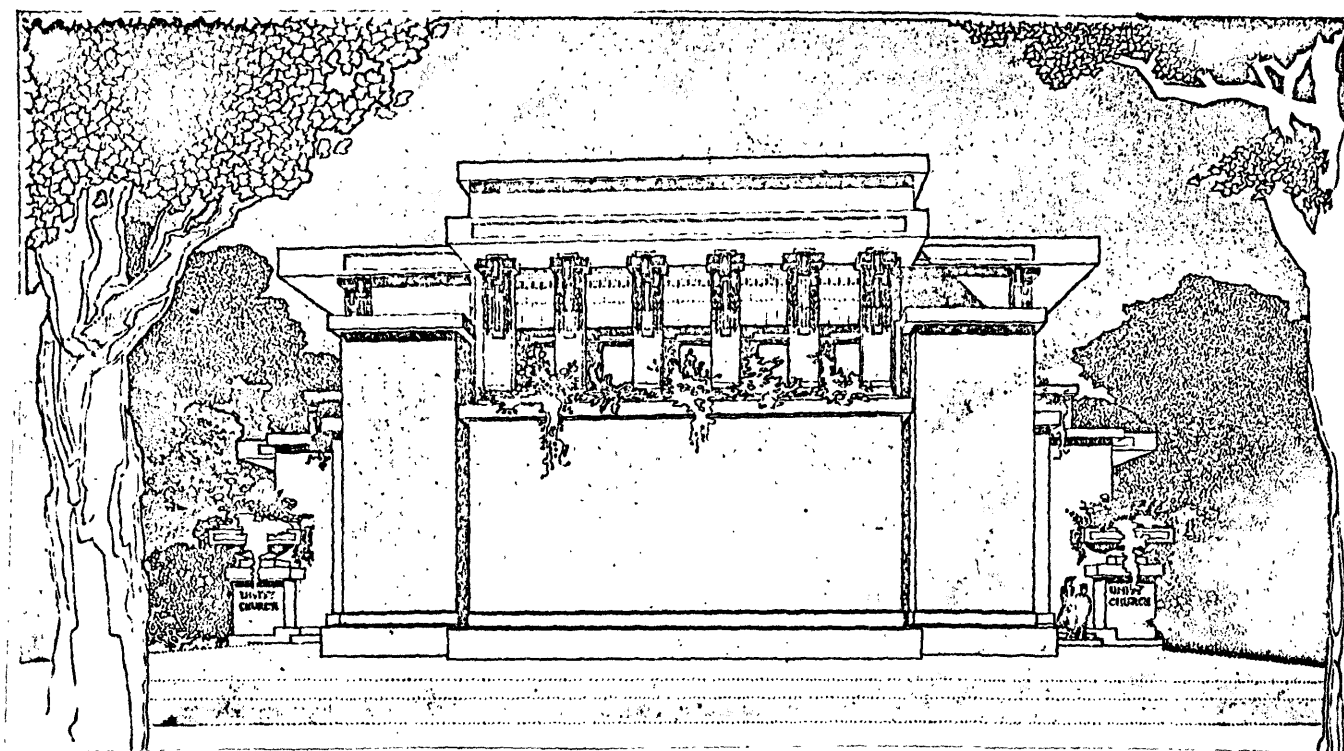
STATE Illinois	
COUNTY Cook	
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ENTRY NUMBER	DATE

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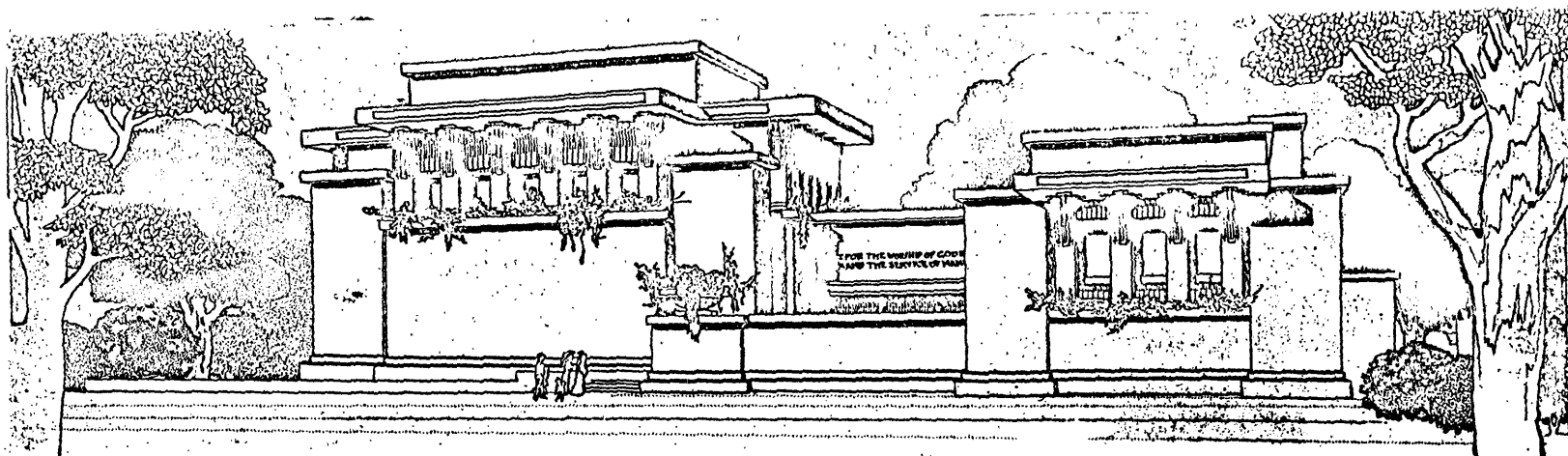
9. Major Bibliographical References - Continued

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The New Edifice of Unity Church, Oak Park Illinois. Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect. Descriptive and Historical Matter by Dr. Rodney F. Johonnot, Pastor. (Published by the New Unity Church Club, June, 1906; republished, Oak Park, Illinois, 1961).



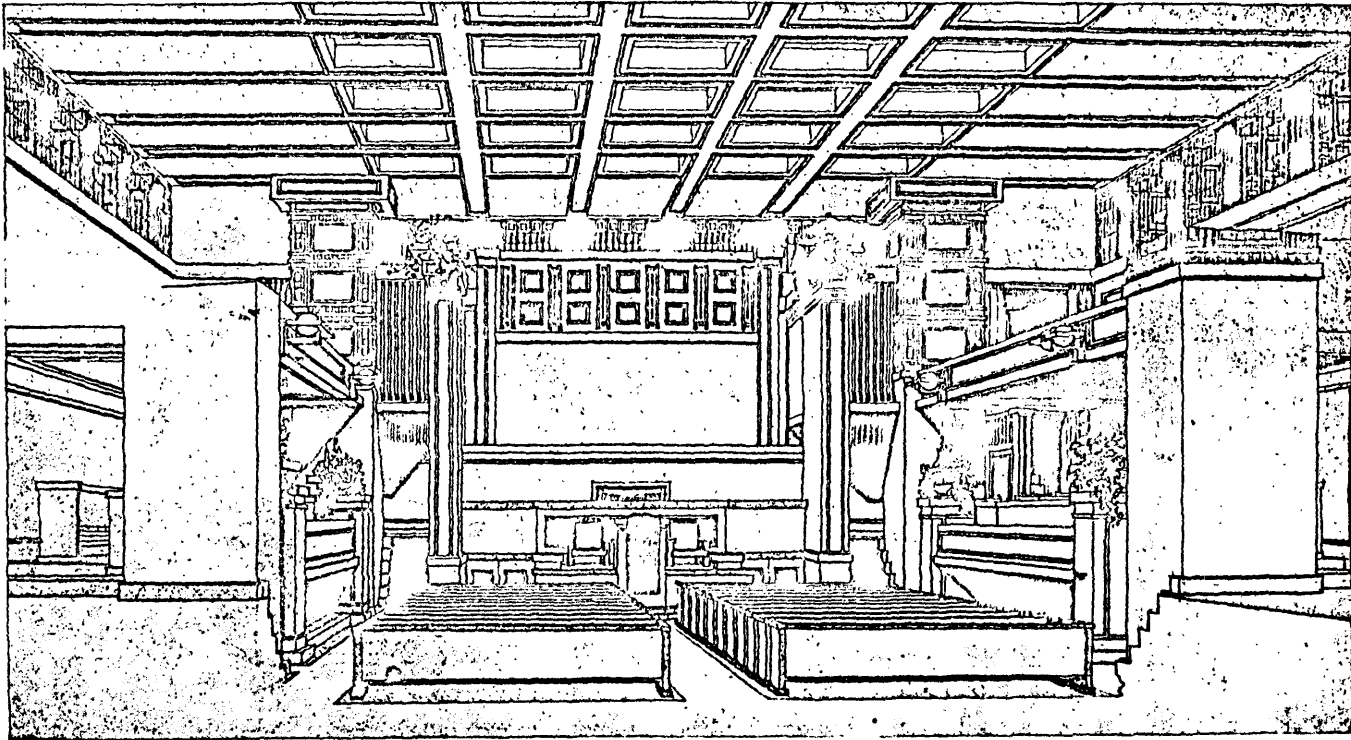
North(Lake Street) Elevation
of
Unity Temple,
Oak Park, Illinois



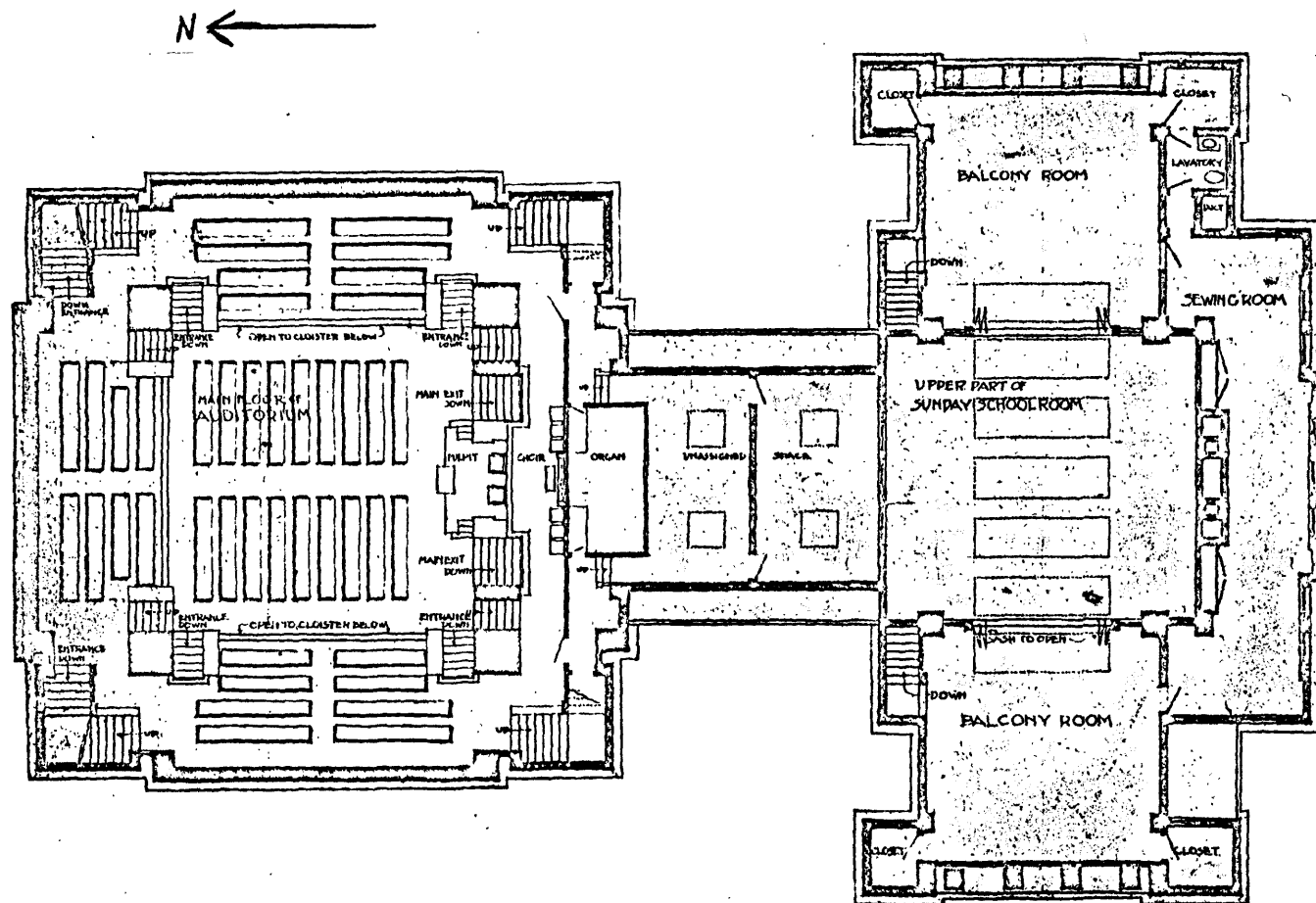
REPRODUCED FROM THE ORIGINAL FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT RENDERING OF UNITY CHURCH

1906

West (Kenilworth Ave.) elevation
of Unity Temple,
Oak Park, Illinois



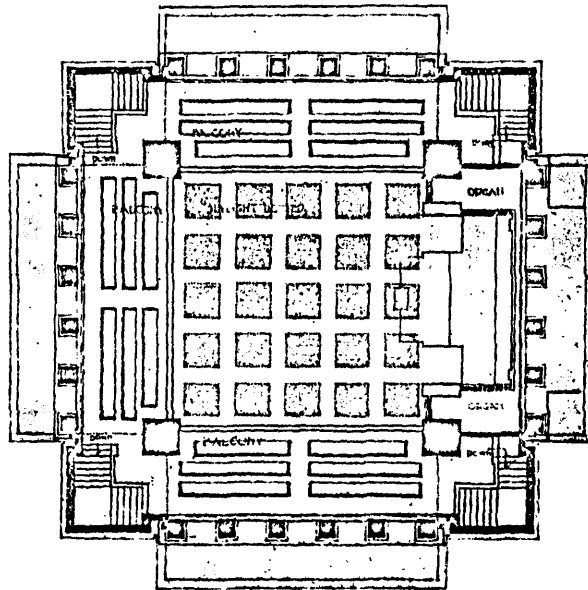
Interior of the Temple, looking south.
Unity Temple,
Oak Park, Illinois



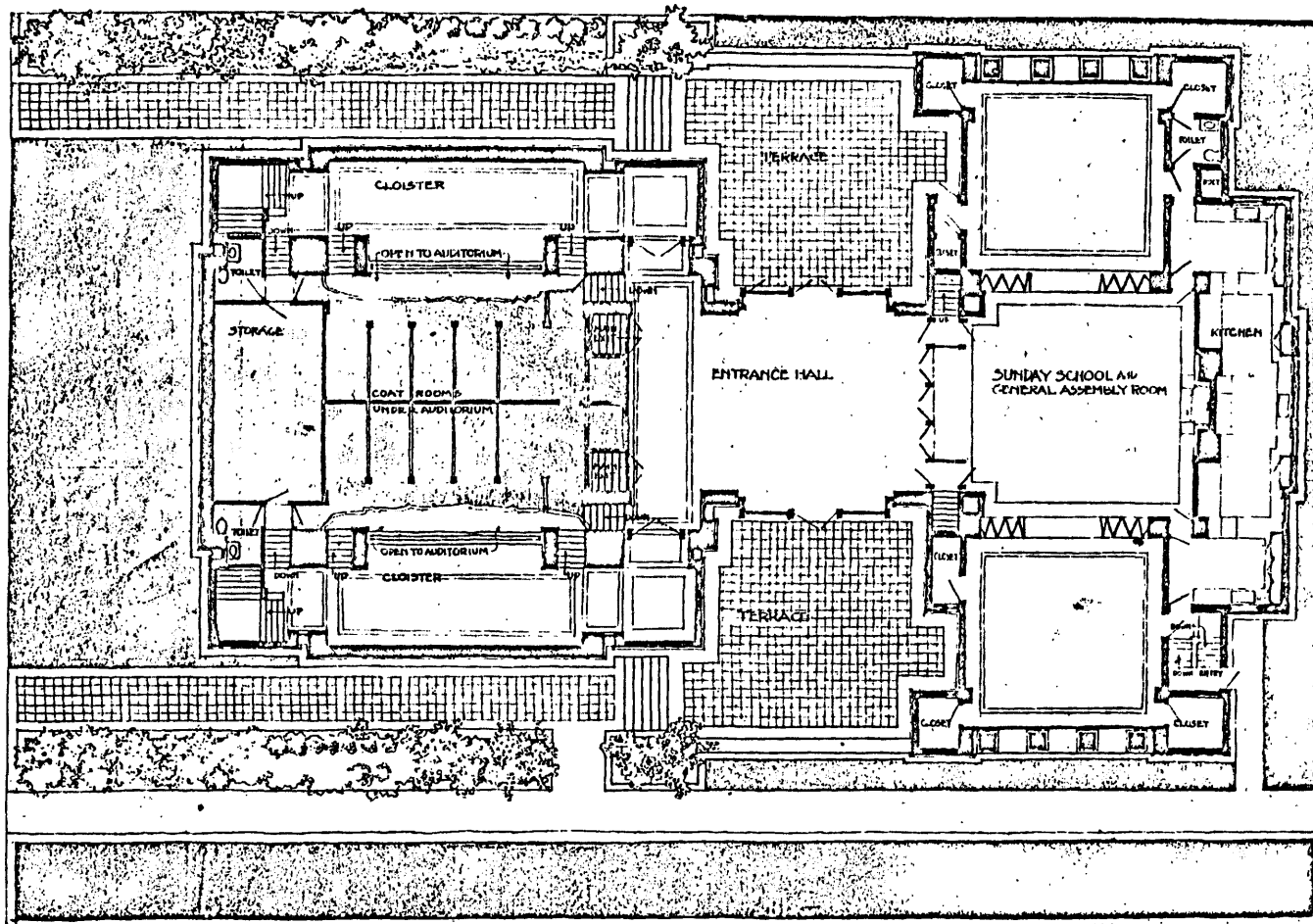
PLAN OF THE TEMPLE FLOOR

Unity Temple, Oak Park,
Illinois

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Plan of the Gallery,
Unity Temple,
Oak Park, Illinois



PLAN OF THE GROUND FLOOR

Unity Temple,
Oak Park, Illinois