

See Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple, restored

By: EDWARD KEEGAN July 18, 2017

Architects use words like "innovative," "cutting edge" and "challenging" with such ubiquity that they're easy to dismiss.

But there are buildings that have stood the test of time, been proven as all three, and are so forward-thinking that they remain so today.

Oak Park's Unity Temple, designed in 1905 by Frank Lloyd Wright, is one of them. Thanks to a recently completed \$25 million renovation, it now looks as good as the day it was dedicated in 1909.

Chicago architect Gunny Harboe oversaw work on the National Historic Landmark. He's been working on Wright designs for much of his four-decade career, including the last 17 years at Unity Temple. It's his attention to detail—and Wright's intention—that allows a visitor to see the building with new eyes.

Unity Temple's main worship space is a study in contrasts. While a perfect square in plan and symmetrical in layout, Wright broke with traditional forms of church architecture. It is a self-contained world of its own, with the room framed by stairs at each corner, double balconies on three sides and a pulpit on the fourth. A gridded skylight and high, clerestory windows provide ample daylight while blocking any hint of the surrounding neighborhood.

Wright developed an elaborate and abstract series of geometric motifs using simple wood moldings and plaster surfaces that guide the eye up, down and around—creating an intricate interplay in which vertical and horizontal alternate so that neither becomes dominant. "It's a very dynamic space," Harboe says.

The renovation's most dramatic changes are to the interior, where more than a mile of wood trim and plaster surface has been restored to Wright's original design—giving us the best look at what the master architect intended as his summary of architecture when he designed it at the tender age of 38. Gone are cracked plaster and leaky roofs—not to mention the relatively flat colorings that have been seen in recent years.

Harboe and the contractors spent a lot of time getting the plaster right. The muted earth tones had been authentically identified some time ago, but it was the exacting plaster finish that Wright devised that hasn't been seen in many decades. There are now three textures—smooth, semi-rough and rough—covered with a thin coat of paint in colors that evoke nature. An exposed sand aggregate can be seen through the paint, and the varying levels of roughness give just a handful of colors a wide variety of different hues. There's often a dappled effect that might have been drawn directly from the impressionist paintings that had become popular in the years of Wright's early career.

"Let the room inside be the architecture outside," Wright explained of Unity Temple in his 1932 autobiography. "It may be seen as the soul of the design."

We're fortunate that the Unitarian congregation that commissioned Wright has been good stewards of his work for more than a century. The new renovation proves that the soul of Unity Temple remains alive and inspiring to all who visit. See more photos below.

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