

Nature as the Spiritual Foundation of Frank Lloyd Wright's Sacred Architecture: Earth, Sky, Light, and Water

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Frank Lloyd Wright considered himself a deeply religious man, coming from a Unitarian family with a long line of ministers extending back to the days of the Reformation in England (from Mike Wallace TV interview with Wright, September 1957). He believed in a Welsh triad that originated during the time of King Arthur and emphasized the relationship of humans and nature. This influence made him claim that freedom of spirit could be achieved through harmony with nature.¹ This natural intrinsic harmony became the core of Wright's organic architecture theory, and led him to search for a unique American style that would express the American landscape and its values. He believed that the study of the relation of nature to God would help him find beauty and truth and teach him how to evoke a spiritual awakening of an "America more in tune with the principles of nature and the creator."²

Wright saw nature as all the body of God we can ever see. Therefore, he emphasized in his designs the relationship with nature, which made him believe that all his architecture is sacred. Still, the question remains of how sacred aspects of nature became an inspiration to Frank Lloyd Wright's designs, especially his religious structures. His houses of worship can be considered as an elaboration on Ralph W. Emerson's Transcendental philosophy. Emerson's essay 'The Over-Soul' (1847) emphasized the relationship of nature with truth, the universe, and the divine as the key to a direct understanding of God.³

This attitude of linking nature to God and the understanding of the cosmos as the core of the world brought me to investigate how sacred aspects of nature became the spiritual foundation of Frank Lloyd Wright's sacred architecture.

The sacred universal fundamental elements as related to the cosmos/nature

The literature on sacred places as related to the cosmos indicates that four universal fundamental elements (earth, air, fire, and water) reflect the structure of the cosmos and represent its sacred values.⁴ Furthermore, these four elements are connected by a fifth "fixed" element, the core of the universe.⁵ These elements already appeared in antiquity as a set of archetypes that explained

¹ Frank Lloyd Wright. "Is It Good-By To Gothic?" *Together Magazine* May 1958; reprinted in Bruce Pfeiffer (ed.). *Frank Lloyd Wright Collected Writings* (Vol. 5: 227-233, New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1992)

² Rank N. Owings Jr. "Frank Lloyd Wright and The Regionalists: Visions for America." *Frank Lloyd Wright quarterly* (Vol. 14 No.1: 4-15, 2003)

³ Ralph W. Emerson, "The Over-Soul (Essay IX)." *Essays: First Series*. 1841 (published in <http://www.emersoncentral.com/oversoul.htm>. accessed, May 5, 2015).

⁴ Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and The Profane-The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959/1987); Tuan Yi-Fu. "Sacred Space: Explorations on an Idea", in Karl Butzer (ed.) *Dimensions of Human Geography* (University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Paper, 1978: 84-99); Harold W. Turner.

From Temple to Meeting House: the Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship (New York, NY: Mouton, 1979); A T Mann. *Sacred Architecture*. (Shaftesbury, Dorset [England]; Rockport, Mass: Element, 1993).

⁵ The fifth element, the core of the cosmos was called in antiquity *quintessence*, and *space/void* by the Chinese.

patterns in nature. The underlying idea was that everything of the universe was formed out of these four elements.

Earth represents stability, permanence and materiality. *Air* is a shapeless mobile and dynamic element, which is a key to human existence. It is often associated with the sky and thus with heaven. *Fire* is associated with the burning hell on the one hand, and with godly power and the eternal light on the other. *Water* represents the liquid state of the energy of life as well as purity. It brings humans closer to the divine as water is considered the Ocean of God and one of God's dwellings.⁶

Wright's sacred architecture and the sacred universal elements

Although Wright did not address specifically the classical four elements of earth, fire, air, and water, he did interpret them in his designs. The analysis of some of his religious projects reveals their direct relationship to the four elements as representatives of nature.

Wright worked with *earth* as a design feature. His proposal for the Memorial to the Soil Chapel in Wisconsin (1934) suggested a building growing out of earth with parallel lines to earth. Its proposed square plan, similar to Unity Temple in Illinois (1906), represents a solid and powerful image associated with earth.⁷ An additional example of a building growing out of earth is his proposal for the Pilgrim Congregational Church in California (1958).⁸ Wright designed battered sides that gently rose from the grade towards the sanctuary in a slope of 30 degrees. This design, although not necessary for structural strength, gives the appearance that the church is growing out of the ground and crowns the hill (Fig. 1).

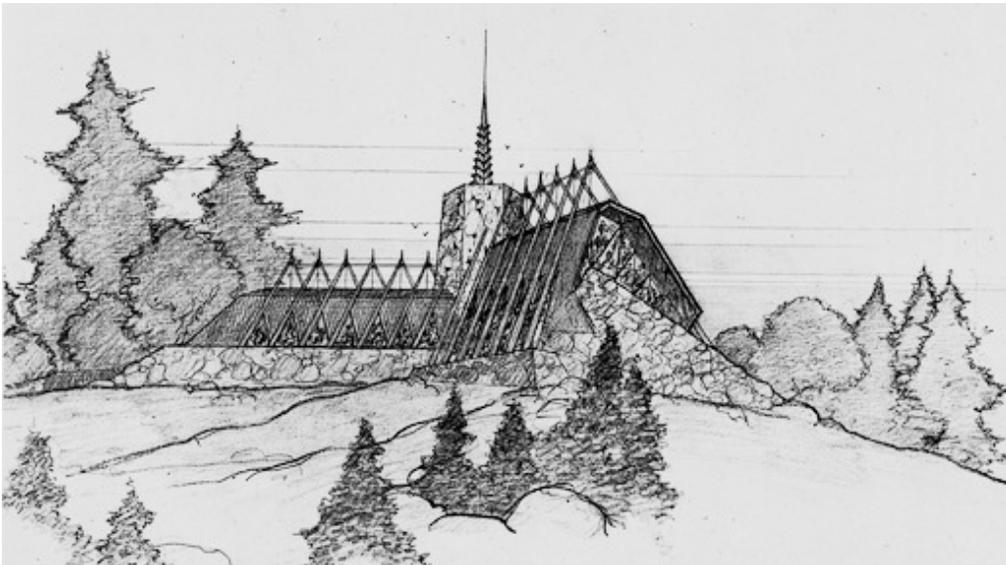


Figure 1: Frank Lloyd Wright's Drawing of his Proposal for The Pilgrim Congregational Church in California (1958) (source: a church's brochure)

⁶ Jeanette Mirsky. *Houses of God*, (Phoenix edition, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁷ Anat Geva. *Frank Lloyd Wright's Sacred Architecture: Faith, Form, and Building Technology* (London: Routledge, 2011:22, Fig. 1.2)

⁸ Due to budget constrains, the congregation built only part of wright's initial proposal

Wright saw the horizontal forms as humble lines of human life on earth.⁹ Therefore, his designs were based on horizontal lines parallel to the land and sky of the American prairie, and the American desert. Thus, the horizontal axes represented the earth and the horizon, while the vertical lines illustrated nature's depth, sky, and light. Examples of the use of horizontal lines include his Unity Temple, Illinois (the form) (Fig. 2); the Pettit Chapel, Illinois (the trim) (Fig. 3); and the 1940 Community Church in Missouri. In these projects the horizontal lines were part of the form of the building and its details (e.g., parapets, trims, balconies).



Figure 2: Unity Temple, Oak Park, Illinois (1906): Horizontal Lines of the Form (source: Author's photo)

⁹ Suzette Lucas. "Buildings for Democracy: The Mildred and Stanley Rosenbaum House and Marin County Civic Center" *Frank Lloyd Wright Quarterly* (Vol. 13 No. 2: 4-21, 2004).



Figure 3: The Pettit Chapel, Illinois (1906): Horizontal Lined of the Trim (source: Author's photo)

Both Annie Pfeiffer Chapel in Florida (1938), and the First Christian Church in Arizona (1973)¹⁰ exhibit the use of horizontal lines parallel to earth, and a vertical steeple/tower to relate to the sky (Figs. 4, 5).



Figure 4: Annie Pfeiffer Chapel in Florida (1938): Horizontal lines of the Balconies and Verticality of the Bell Tower (source: Author's photo)

¹⁰ The First Christian Church in Phoenix, Arizona was built in 1973 following the design and specification of Wright's design proposal for the Southwest Christian Seminary on the same site from 1950.



Figure 5: The First Christian Church in Arizona (1950/1973): Horizontal lines of the Roof and Verticality of the Steeple (source: Author's photo)

Wright used local stone in most of his churches to express the poetic material quarried out of earth, and to enhance the notion of permanency that is fundamental in church's design.¹¹ He also used adobe bricks that are made from earth in his proposal for the Albert M. Johnson Compound and Shrine in the California's Death Valley (1921). With this project Wright discovered the desert landscape and its fauna patterns, which inspired the combination degrees for his grid designs and module systems (30, 60, 120 degrees). This discovery "marked Wright's first contact with the desert...extraordinary for both its natural and its human history, so much so that it had already acquired a mythical place in the American mind."¹² Indeed, in this proposal he used graceful horizontal lines that blended into the desert landscape with continuous low-lying horizontal forms. The lines of this project expressed the ever-changing quality of the desert landscape and the local craft of the region's nomadic tribes. However, the client did not appreciate Wright's attentiveness to the land and its people and rejected the proposal. Later, Wright's sensitivity to the desert was expressed in his design of Taliesin West in Arizona, and other projects in the region.¹³

Wright utilized the natural element of *water* in some of his religious projects to create boundaries and/or thresholds between the secular and the sacred. Examples include a proposal of a pool and cascading water for the Johnson Desert Compound and Shrine; a proposed pool for the Memorial to the Soil Chapel in Wisconsin, which was supposed to serve as a reflective pool

¹¹ Wright always used stone in combination with other materials such as wood, concrete, steel, and copper.

¹² Neil Levine. *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996: 174-175).

¹³ Geva 2011

behind the glass wall of the chapel's choir;¹⁴ and two reflecting pools in his proposal for Taliesin Unity Chapel in Wisconsin (1958). These pools would accompany the paths toward the sacred.¹⁵

Wright treated light as a technique to enhance sacredness and divine presence. The skylights of Unity Temple in Illinois, and of Annie Pfeiffer Chapel in Florida (Figs. 6); and the translucent pyramidal roof of Beth Shalom Synagogue in Pennsylvania (Fig. 7) illustrate spiritual symbolism of sky (*air*) and light (*fire*). Introducing bright colors in some of his glass design and the way it captures light can be associated with fire, which encompasses a spectrum of colors (e.g., the Annie Pfeiffer Chapel in Florida (1938); the Minor Chapel in Florida (1954); and the First Christian Church in Arizona (1950/1973).



Figure 6: The Skylight of Annie Pfeiffer Chapel, Florida (1938)

¹⁴ Geva 2011:22, Fig. 1.2

¹⁵ Geva 2011:27, Fig. 1.8



Figure 7: The Translucent Pyramidal Roof of Beth Shalom Synagogue, Pennsylvania (1954)

Thus, Wright abstracted the geometry and order he found in nature to create a composition of the universe as associated with spiritual meanings of earth, sky, light, and water. He introduced this concept into the design of his houses of worship and created dynamic three-dimensional sacred spaces. He believed that understanding nature's dimensions, axes, and materials links his sacred architecture to the American land and sky and brings the worshiper closer to the divine. Indeed, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the National Register of Historic Sites declared most of Wright's religious buildings as a contribution to the American culture. Furthermore, his built projects have been admired by the clergy, and by the congregations: "Mr. Wright has caught the spirit of liberal religion and has given it architectural embodiment, and created a feeling of unity and elevation which surpass description."¹⁶ As such, these houses of worship served and still serve as their faith icon through generations: "They [Annie Pfeiffer and Danforth (Minor) Chapels in Florida] have been with my family from birth to death."¹⁷

¹⁶ Max Gaebler, a minister of the Unitarian Meeting House - Max D. Gaebler, et al. "A Church in the Attitude of Prayer" *Architectural Forum* (1952 December: 85-92).

¹⁷ Randall M., et al. *The Buildings Of Frank Lloyd Wright at Florida Southern College* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007: 23).