

# The Cardston Temple, Alberta, and Nonconformist Form

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In June 1991, Joseph Siry published a splendid article in the *Art Bulletin* entitled "Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple and Architecture for Liberal Religion in Chicago, 1885-1909."<sup>1</sup> In it, Siry traced the history of the Unitarian and Universalists faiths as they developed in and around Chicago at the end of the 19th century to demonstrate that Unity Temple was not only a pivotal moment in Wright's architectural career, but also that this building could be understood as the culmination of a series of experiments in a new style of architecture for that religion.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed Unity Temple in 1905-06 and completed it in late 1908. Four years later, in the autumn of 1912, the young architectural firm of Pope and Burton of Salt Lake City won an open competition to design the Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Cardston, Alberta. The temple was built and decorated from 1913 to 1923 (Figures 1, 2). In its careful integration of space, structure, and massing, its conscious lack of historical references, and its abstract linear decoration, the Cardston Temple shows the influence of Unity Temple (Figures 3, 4). In fact, Pope and Burton were among the early admirers of Frank Lloyd Wright, and had already designed a Mormon chapel in his distinct manner before they began work on the Alberta temple.<sup>2</sup>

There are, however, differences as well as similarities between these two buildings. Through its uncompromising monumentality, reinforced by the tight axial plan and hard white surfaces, the Cardston Temple signals the authority of the Church over the people. By comparison, the Unity Temple, with its buff-coloured concrete surfaces and proximity to the street corner, appears as a rather unpretentious building. Pope and Burton were attracted to the Unity Temple design because their Mormon Church, like the Unitarian Church, was searching for an architectural model that could satisfactorily convey the character of its distinctive nonconformist religion.

Using the Unity and Cardston temples as examples, this paper will demonstrate that the search for an appropriate built form was shared by many nonconformist congregations, both in the United States and Canada. It will also show that designers of these religious structures were united in their attempt to

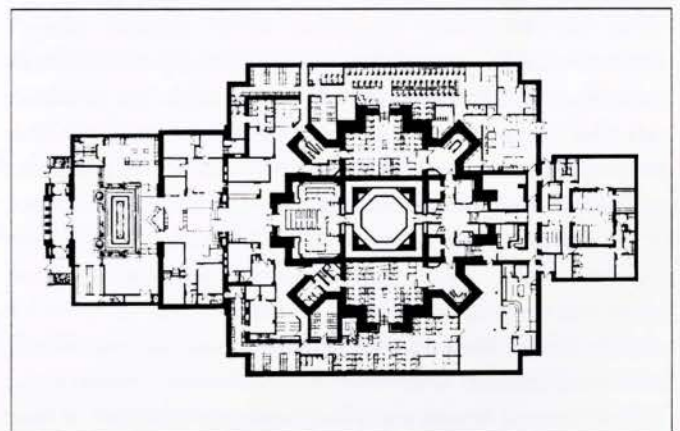


Figure 1. Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Cardston, Alberta, built 1913-23, Pope and Burton, architects; principal facade in the 1920s. (Glenbow Archives)

Figure 2. Ground floor plan of the Cardston Temple after the renovations of 1989-91. (*Canadian Architect* 36, no. 10 [October 1991]: 32)

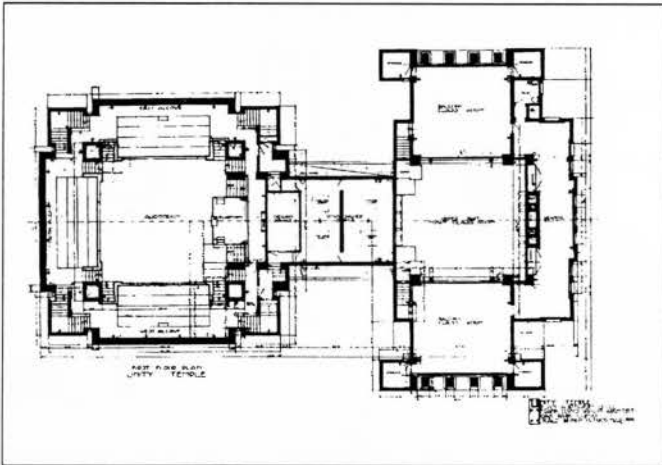


Figure 3. Unity Temple, Oak Park, Illinois, built 1906-08, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect. (*Frank Lloyd Wright: Ausgeführte Bauten* [Berlin: Wasmuth, 1911])

Figure 4. Auditorium level plan of the Unity Temple. (The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation)

dispense with the identifying architectural characteristics of mainstream Christian architecture — mainly the basilican plan, the Gothic Revival style, and the use of spires — and, most significantly, in their adoption of Beaux-Art principles as a means to resolve the design problem.

The search for a new form for church design began in the late 1860s, when High Victorian religion found its stride and congregations began to need additional space for church offices, libraries, meeting halls, and the like. These additional features were often crammed into conventional Gothic Revival structures, which were not equipped to take them. Competent solutions surfaced with the spread of Beaux-Arts principals of design in the 1890s, beginning in the United States, then, as architects came into contact with the French form of architectural education, making their way to Canada in the first and second decades of the 20th century. This process is well illustrated by the Cardston and Unity temples.

The Cardston Temple was the eighth temple to be constructed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or the Mormons as they are popularly known. The Church was founded in upper New York State in 1830 and its first temple was erected at Kirkland, Ohio, a few years later (Figure 5). This was a simple structure, inspired by traditional New England meeting houses. In the quarter-century that followed, Mormon religious practices became quite complex. Liturgical complexity was translated into built form in the Salt Lake City Temple, begun in 1854 but not completed and dedicated until 1893. This is a great granite structure four storeys high terminating at either end in curved apses. Each apse is crowned by three spires (Figure 6).

Adapted to the complexity of Mormon religious ceremonies, the building contains a number of important rooms. These rooms include a baptistry, a marriage room, and four splendid teaching rooms. Temple ritual involves the orderly procession of the initiated through each of these teaching rooms, finally arriving at the magnificent celestial room, the most sacred room in the temple.

Church elders stipulated that the Cardston Temple had to contain the major rooms of the Salt Lake City temple, but no doubt recognizing the need to reintroduce order into their temple designs, they conceded that the architects could dispense with certain other spaces, and that spires were to be omitted. Doing away with spires echoed a decision taken earlier by the Oak Park Unitarians. In his autobiography, Wright explained that “he had begun the process of designing Unity Temple with the idea of eliminating the traditional church steeple pointing to heaven and instead building a temple to man, appropriate to his uses as a meeting-place, in which to study man for himself for his God’s sake. A modern meeting-house.”<sup>3</sup>

As Joseph Siry has shown, Wright was paraphrasing the ideas of two highly articulate Unitarian and Universalist ministers in Chicago, the Rev. Rodney Fuller Johonnot and Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Wright’s uncle. Both men felt the need of a modern church building and both held strong views on the form such a building should take. During the last quarter of the 19th century, the Unitarians of Oak Park were housed in a simple rectangular board-and-batten structure built in 1872 and designed in a Gothic Revival style, with a pitched roof and a steeple rising over the entrance. Its exterior design suggested a high interior space divided into chancel and nave, but the building actually had two floors, with an auditorium space on the second and a massive organ in place of the altar.

The discombobulation between the interior space and exterior appearance was not unlike any number of other late-19th century churches found in United States and Canada. American scholar Jeanne Halgren Kilde has shown in an upcoming article that several protestant denominations had begun experimenting with church design in the late 1860s,

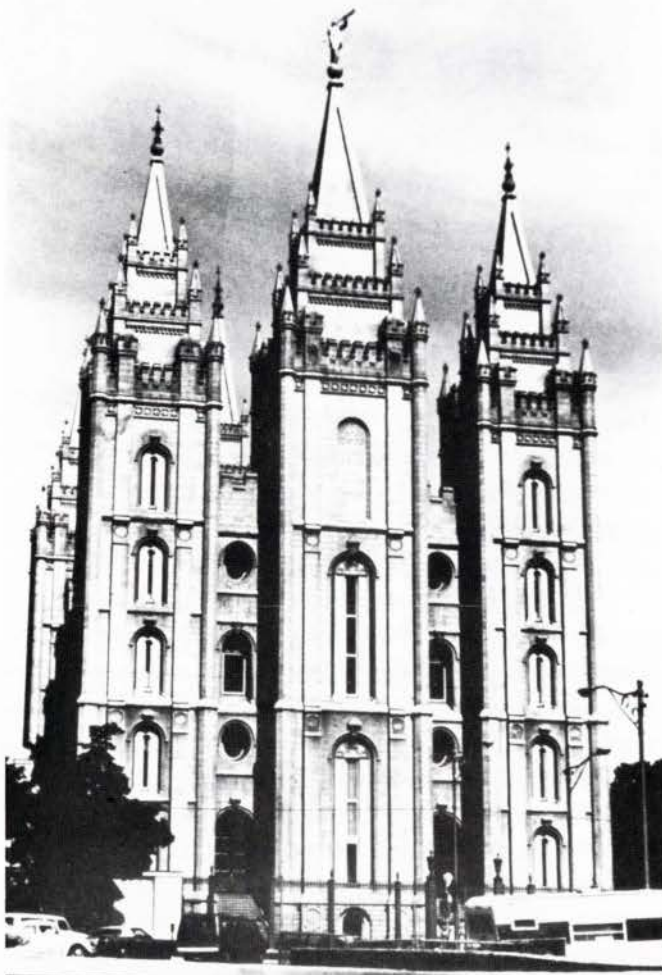
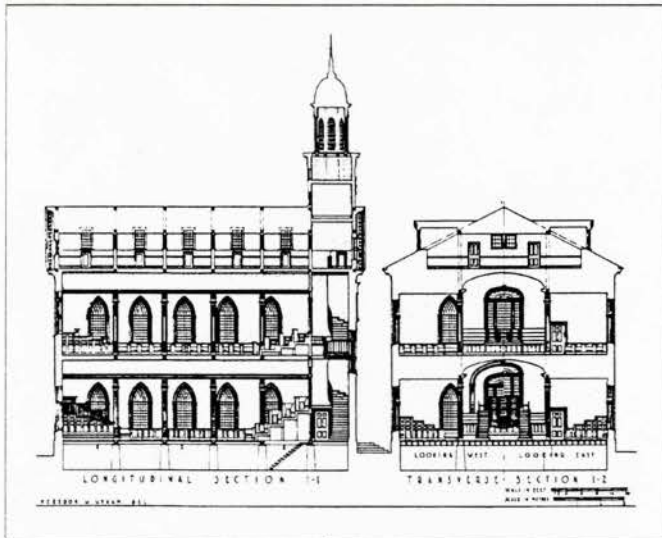


Figure 5. Longitudinal and cross sections of the Mormon Temple at Kirkland, Ohio, built in the early 1840s. (L.B. Andrew, *The Early Temples of the Mormons: The Architecture of the Millennial Kingdom in the American West* [Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1978], 42)

Figure 6. The Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, built 1854-93, T.O. Angell, architect. (Andrew, *Early Temples*, 155)

resulting in the widespread construction of amphitheatrical churches by Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. In her words:

Enclosed within popular Romanesque and Gothic Revival exteriors, these amphitheatre-like religious spaces were intended to enhance the congregation's ability to see and hear the activities occurring in the "stage" or pulpit area. As in Greek amphitheatres, the audience floor sloped down to the central performance area and the seats or pews curved around this focus.<sup>4</sup>

Kilde convincingly argues that the overwhelming popularity of this particular church type lay in its architectural connections to secular performance spaces. As services increasingly paralleled secular performance, architects borrowed the setting of music halls and theatres for use in the church.

In the late 1860s Chicago had at least two such auditorium churches, both in the Gothic Revival style: the First Congregational, designed by Henry Gay in 1869, and the Union Park Congregational, designed by Gurdon Randall, also dating to 1869. There were others outside Chicago, including the Church of the Disciples in Boston, a Unitarian Church built at the same time as the Chicago buildings. This building, which had an auditorium enclosed in an 85-foot-square structure designed in a simple Romanesque style, marked a greater break with the traditional Gothic Revival models. It had an central octagonal roof with a clerestory to allow natural light to stream down on the central space. Rodney Fuller Johonnot had been a member of this church before he was appointed pastor of the Unity Church, Chicago, in 1892.

The nonconformists introduced auditorium seating to Canada in the 1870s. John Ross Robinson, in the fourth volume of his *Landmarks of Toronto*, claimed that first Toronto example of an auditorium church was the Jarvis Street Baptist Church, built in 1874 (Figure 7). It was soon joined by a number of other auditorium churches. Writing in 1904, Robinson remarked that since the mid 1880s the interiors of Toronto churches had "undergone in many cases considerable alterations."<sup>5</sup> The Gothic Revival First Congregational Church in London, Ontario, also dates from 1874, and as Lynne DiStaffano has noted:

The dramatic quality of the facade takes on a new dimension when one perceives that it bore little relationship to the body of the church. The front door led into a stairhall, from which one ascended to an auditorium that was a match in novelty for the building's exterior design. The auditorium itself was oval .... The raked pews were arranged in a semi-circle. There was a horseshoe-shaped gallery. The gas lighting was indirect.<sup>6</sup>

She added: "If all this sounds somewhat theatrical, the 'stage' was purposely unassuming."<sup>7</sup>

Incongruities of this type between facade and interior were seen by many architects as a sign of weak design. Speaking to the Toronto Architectural Sketch Club in 1892, W.A. Langton complained that:

We still have amphitheatrical churches with a couple of storeys of society rooms and class rooms, all contained within an exterior which represents as faithfully as it can the medieval church with its single spacious hall.<sup>8</sup>

Such criticism was articulated in the knowledge that changes for the better were already in the making, thanks in large part to the increasingly widespread adoption of the Beaux-Arts design principals in the United States, which dictated that the process of building begins with the principal interior space.

It is interesting to note that in Chicago, in 1898, even Wright himself was criticized for not indicating the existence of an auditorium and church rooms on the exterior of a design for an eight-storey building he and architect Dwight Heads Perkins had prepared for the Unitarians. Not satisfied with their first effort, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the driving force behind the venture, requested that the architects send their drawing to Ernest Flagg for his comments. The *École des Beaux-Arts*-trained Flagg had returned to New York in 1891, where he had set about promoting the principles and aesthetics of the Paris school. A strong promoter of structural rationalism as advanced by Eugène-Émmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Flagg was devoted to the school's concept of the *parti*, the logical solution to a problem from the standpoint of the architect as constructor and artist. With other Beaux-Arts trained architects, including Charles McKim, Flagg had founded the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects to promote its educational advantages. His activities quickly came to the attention of architects working in Canada; Eden Smith, in a lecture to the Ontario Association of Architects, informed his audience that

much valuable information could be obtained on this point from Mr. Ernest Flagg of New York, Mr. Thos. Hastings and several others.... The two architects mentioned above have started ateliers of their own in New York and ... the influence they have had with young men entering them has been really remarkable.<sup>9</sup>

In 1901, the president of the OAA justified its decision to adopt such a Beaux-Arts atelier system for Ontario by quoting Ernest Flagg: "although there has been criticism of the Frenchifying of American architecture, students are working along the correct and same lines of study fully convinced that the logical reasoning taught by the great French masters is the proper preparation for their work."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps because church architecture had endured a particularly weak patch, Flagg, like so many others, held outspoken views on the appropriate design for contemporary American



Figure 7. Interior of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church, Toronto, Ontario, built 1874-75, Langley Langley & Burke, architects. (*Saturday Night Magazine*, 1910, in Glenn V. Tomlinson and Andrew M. Fountain, "From Strength to Strength": A Pictorial History of Jarvis Street Baptist Church, 1818-1993 [Toronto: The Gospel Witness, 1993], 14)

churches. In 1895 he had produced a highly publicized design composition for the national Episcopal Cathedral of St. Peter and Paul in Washington, arguing for a centralized auditorium rather than longitudinal naves as the preferable space for protestant churches on the basis of better visibility and acoustics.

Flagg was able to put his views on church design into practice in 1897, when he was asked by the Congregationalist congregation in Hartford, Connecticut, to design a building that would realize a new architectural form reflecting "the most modern ideas of Church architecture."<sup>11</sup> Set on top of a hill, this plain red brick building explored the concept of a church as an auditorium. The auditorium was emphasized as the main spacial form, and the auxiliary spaces were subordinated to it. Moreover, the whole was clearly legible on the exterior. In explaining the choice of design to a rather querulous local community, *The Congregationalist* reported that "for the exterior a departure was desired from the old Puritan style, and also the cathedral and Gothic ideas were laid aside."<sup>12</sup> This was the second time the church had dispensed with the old styles. In 1891, Carrère and Hastings had used a rotunda as the basis for their Central Congregationalist Church in Providence, Rhode Island. Together, these two churches marked a dramatic departure from the traditional Congregationalist meeting-house form.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 8. The celestial room, the culmination of the interior hierarchy of the Cardston Temple, photographed c. 1923. (Glenbow Archives)

To return to the Unity and Cardston temples, when Flagg responded to the Wright and Perkins plan, he went to straight to the heart of the matter:

The exterior does not tell the story of the interior, there is nothing to indicate the presence of the great hall.... I must say that I am unable to place myself quite in what appears to have been your point of view. It seems to me that the design is too coldly logical, and that you have reasoned all the poetry out of it.<sup>14</sup>

On reading Flagg's reply, Jenkin Lloyd Jones acknowledged that he too felt that somehow the auditorium ought to shine on the outside:

I am thinking of a building of modern architecture, gracious though not gorgeous, representing in its lines — dignity, hospitality and service, a building with four faces, each honest and clean, no pretence on the boulevard that is shamed by a slovenliness on the alley.<sup>15</sup>

In 1902, the old Unity Church in Oak Park burned to the ground and Wright was hired to design its replacement. As



Figure 9. The Unity Temple's principal interior space, the auditorium. (*Inland Architect and News Record* 52 [December 1908]: 77)

Siry has so nicely demonstrated, Johonnot and his building committee played a large part in coaxing the final design out of the architect. Wright later took most of the credit, saying that he had created a "frank revival of the old temple form, as better suited to the requirements of a modern congregation than the nave and transept of the cathedral type."<sup>16</sup> Later still, he explained the design process:

I think I first consciously began to try to beat the box in the Larkin Building — 1906. I found a natural opening to the liberation I sought when (after a great struggle) I finally pushed the staircase towers out from the corners of the main building, made them into free-standing, individual features.... You will see this feeling growing up becoming more apparent a little later in Unity Temple: there perhaps is where you will find the first real expression of the idea that the space within the building is the reality of that building.<sup>17</sup>

When the Cardston Temple is compared to the Unity Temple, it seems clear that the young Pope and Burton had not only learned from the lesson of the Unity Temple but, like Frank Lloyd Wright, had benefited from Beaux-Arts design theories. By then, Chicago, the site of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, had a number of ateliers and a strong Beaux-Arts

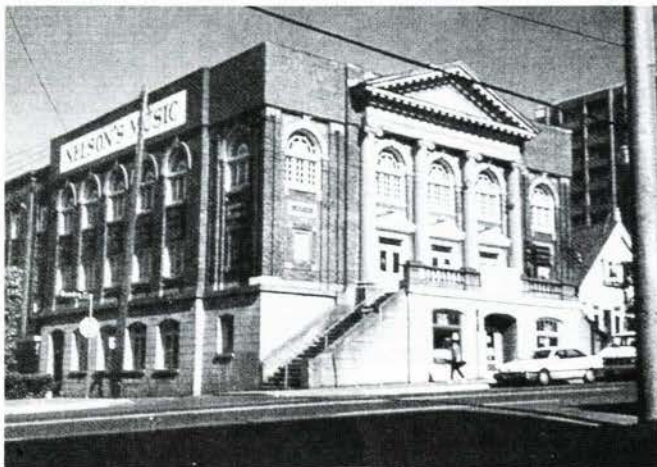
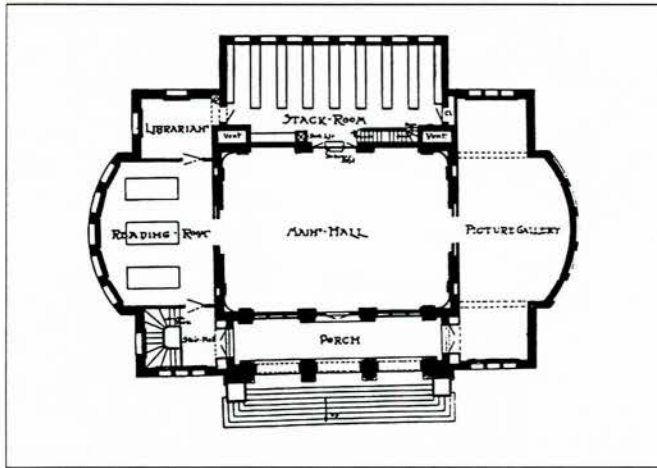


Figure 10. The clearly articulated main floor plan of the Lawrence Library in Pepperell, Massachusetts, built 1899-1901, Ernest Flagg, architect. (Mardges Bacon, *Ernest Flagg: Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986], fig. 23)

Figure 11. Congregational Church, Victoria, British Columbia, built 1912-13, Breseman & Durfee, architects. (Ted Mills, 1993)

focus. Like the Unity Temple, the Cardston Temple was designed from the inside out (Figures 8, 9). Freed from the need to incorporate a long assembly room, the architects were able to experiment with a central space. Nevertheless, the exercise proved difficult until the architects focused upon the spaces within the building:

[we] had had the greatest difficulty with the plan until he hit on the idea of organizing the four ordinance rooms around the centre of the building like the spokes of a wheel, each room extending toward one of the cardinal directions. The celestial room would be placed in the centre at the very top of the building, with the baptistry directly below. Smaller diagonal projections between the main rooms could contain stairways and minor rooms.<sup>18</sup>

Pope and Burton had also recognized the potency of the temple form, and at the dedication ceremony Burton explained

the thought process that lay behind its choice. In so doing, he revealed why the Cardston Temple has a different presence from that of the Unity Temple:

it occurred to us that ... it should not be a Gothic cathedral or a classic temple; but an edifice which should express in its architecture all the boldness and all the truth for which the Gospel stands. For truly this is not a Church that has been established by Joseph Smith, this is not a new thought .... it is the Truth which the Lord revealed even to Father Adam. It dates back to the very inception of this earth, and this being the case, the architecture of its temples should really express that thought. It should be ancient as well as modern. It should express all the power which we associate with God. It should express all the refinement which we associate with God, for truly art is not a thing which is foreign to God. For all that is great and good that has ever been accomplished by man in the arts and sciences, or any endeavour, is of course of God, and to our minds it seemed that a temple should express all these facts.<sup>19</sup>

In pursuing the *differences* between the Unity and Cardston temples, it can be argued that, like Wright, the architects of the Alberta temple were also affected by the Beaux-Arts ideas then circulating. When, for example, the temple is compared to an earlier library designed by Ernest Flagg (Figure 10), it is possible to detect a similar design format: distinctive parts expressing different functions, overhead skylights, raised central core, and separation of the stairwells. The same formula had been used by McKim, Mead, and White for the Low Library, Columbia University, in New York (1898). The building's sense of presence and its great central space caught the imagination of many architects.

McKim, Mead, and White's work was, of course, well known to architects in Canada. For example, in 1901 the firm designed the extension to the Bank of Montreal in Montreal, home to the Maxwell brothers, two of Canada's best known Beaux-Arts architects. Happily, the Maxwells had the opportunity to put their sophisticated talent to the service of the modern church. Although their Church of the Messiah was designed in a Modern Gothic idiom, it was contemporaneous with the Unity Temple, and like the Oak Park building its form was inspired by its function. By the second decade of the 20th century, churches throughout the country exhibited a new vitality. Beaux-Arts influence can be seen, for example, in the spacial organization of the 1912 Chalmers Presbyterian Church in Vancouver, as well as in the 1912 Congregational Church in Victoria (Figure 11).

The attractions of the Cardston Temple are many. Designed only four years after the Unity Temple, its frank expression of Wright's influence, particularly in light of earlier Mormon temples, shows daring and flair. As Unity Temple succeeded in expressing the Church's belief in the principals of reason,

harmony, truth, and simplicity, so too the Cardston Temple was able to express the Mormon's belief in their Church being the rightful heir to a timeless Christianity. And like the Unity Temple, the Cardston building shows the influence of Beaux-Arts principles. As the architects admitted, it was by this logical process of design that they arrived at their compact central plan organized around the sacred space of the celestial room. Both also owe a debt to the logical design principles set down by the École des Beaux-Arts. This process of rational design coupled by a new appreciation of space led many religious bodies out of the impasse that had beset their church design throughout the last quarter of the 19th century. With the new century, these congregations, particularly the nonconformist congregations, shed their attachment to the revival styles and the basilican plan to emerge with fresh forms that set them apart from the mainstream religions.

## Endnotes

- 1 Joseph Siry, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple and Architecture for Liberal Religion in Chicago, 1885-1909," *Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 257-82.
- 2 Peter L. Goss, "The Prairie School Influence in Utah," *Prairie School Review* 12 (1973): 8. The building in question is the Liberty State First Ward Chapel, under construction in 1911 but not completed until 1914.
- 3 Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1932), 154-63.
- 4 This unpublished paper (1994) on the amphitheatrical churches in the United States in the late 19th century was kindly made available by the author.
- 5 John Ross Robertson, *Old Toronto* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1954), 43.
- 6 Nancy Z. Tausky and Lynne D. DiStefano, *Victorian Architecture in London and Southwestern Ontario: Symbols of Aspiration* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 209.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Quoted by Kelly Crossman, *Architecture in Transition: From Art to Practice, 1885-1906* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 114.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 96.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 97.
- 11 *The Congregationalist* [Boston] 48 (1897), n.p.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 This church was first illustrated in the *Architectural Record* 27 (January 1991): 12-13.
- 14 Quoted in Joseph M. Siry, *United Temple: Frank Lloyd Wright and Architecture for Liberal Religion* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1996), 39-41.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Henry Wright, "Unity Temple Revisited," *The Architectural Forum*, June 1969, 30.
- 17 Edgar Kaufman, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright, An American Architecture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), 75.
- 18 On file in the archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah. Copies on file at the architectural firm of Gowling and Gibb, Calgary, Alberta.
- 19 *Ibid.*