Unitarian Meeting House Facts
Written by March Schweitzer, August 2021

• The Unitarian Meeting House was completed in 1951 off FLLW's design of 1946.

• It has been hailed as one of the world's most innovative examples of church architecture and the American Institute of Architect designated it as number 10 of Wright's 17 most consequential buildings

• Why? It changed church architecture. Before it was built church architecture consisted mostly of rectangular buildings with steeples. The Meeting House was the first church to combine the steeple with sanctuary/auditorium.

• The design was so radical the contractor didn't know how to build it. The chief carpenter was an ice-boat building and the church auditorium was constructed like an upside down boat hull.

• It received its National Historic Landmark status in 2004

• It is a typical USONIAN structure -- Uses a grid system (in the case of this building equilateral triangles and diamonds), hidden front door, wide overhanging eaves, big fireplaces, uses all natural materials and concrete which Wright termed "an honest material", same palette of materials and colors throughout (cherokee red), open footprint, radiant heat, use of compression expansion to name a few.

• It was one of Wright's favorite building and it sports Wright's red signature tile, of Wright's 500 buildings only about 50 have them. The tile was a convention he started in the mid to late 1940s.

• Many of the materials used were leading edge and in some cases, bleeding edge. For example, the furnishings (designed by Wright) were built from hardwood plywood, a new material at the time. This saved money but they didn't hold up well over time.

• There were many cost and design overruns which taxed the 150 member congregation to its limits. The building cost about $235,000 to build. Wright's estimate was $80,000, the inexperienced contractor estimated $115,000 and the final cost was $235,000 with most vendors taking 70 cents on the dollar, the congregation hauling 1,000 tons of dolomite from a quarry 30 miles away to save expenses and workmen working some Saturdays for free.

• The church soon began to grow and has had 3 additions. The first (1964) completed his original design and added hidden classrooms, the second, dating to the 1990's was mostly dismantled to make way for the third addition completed in 2009 (built when the congregation had grown to about 1,500 members) which is an award-winning, LEED Gold certified building with a green roof, 16 geothermal wells in the parking lot and other environmentally sound features as well as a well-hidden auditorium which seats 500. It cost about $9 million.

• The Landmark building has had its share of structural issues over its life. The auditorium roof leaked and there were many attempts to correct it, the latest restoration a $1.65 million project that resulted in the strengthening of the auditorium's trusses and replacement of the copper roof. The prow was also restored.

• Wright was a member of the First Unitarian Society and his parents were founding members of the church back in 1879.