

WELKOM-WES: REFORMING UNITY TEMPLE PART 2: THE NOBLE ROOM FOR WORSHIP

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LIGHTING THE AUDITORIUM

Light is the universal signifier of religion. At Unity Temple, light enters the “noble room for worship” through clerestory windows on all four sides, as well as the glass skylights between the “grid of beams” of the ceiling (McCarter, 2005: 83), at Rochester Unitarian church by way of light towers, and in both there are no views out at eye-level. Welkom-Wes has no views out at all and is bathed in light from atop.

Minnaar explained that it was due to the disposition of the windows that in many churches the preacher saw the parishioners in silhouette, which made eye contact difficult (*Gedenkblad* [vii]). However, besides this practical and important issue, Uytendogaardt might have had another aim in mind.

On the exhibition concomitant with his Sophia Gray Memorial lecture delivered in Bloemfontein in August 1990, the panel dedicated to Welkom-Wes³ explains: “The building explores... the implications of working within the constraints of a cube, once this has been found to be the appropriate form for the problem. The square plan [46' 0" or 14m] of the main space requires light in such a way as to reveal its squareness, while the structure which gives dimension to the space follows the same argument in resolving itself as a cluster of columns on the four corners”.

Thus, unlike the general level of lighting at Unity Temple, at Welkom-Wes light was to reveal the cubic volume of the auditorium, a priority no different from that of his mentor at Pennsylvania. Kahn’s work is characterised by buildings that are basically geometric in form and he never ceased to stress that every room was defined by its natural lighting and construction. In Kahn’s major spaces, light penetrates at the edges of the rooms



via monitors, so that the peripheral walls become strongly illuminated, which tends to enlarge the space optically while the structure of the ceiling remains in darkness, appearing heavier.

Uytendogaardt followed suit and supported a flat timber-boarded ceiling on timber trusses, perhaps drawing on the precedent of the drafting room at Wright’s Taliesin Fellowship Complex, 1932 (Fig 12). The trusses span between the square plates of the eight corner columns to cover essentially the stalls of the nave and the seating banks under the soaring ceiling, thus preparing for direct illumination from above of the perimeter of the auditorium, principally the side aisles, with clerestory monitors above the roof, much like the light towers at Rochester.

The east and south galleries were also given light monitors, identical in concept yet stretching the full outer perimeter to reflect light into the space, while on the western gallery the acoustically determined raked concrete roof was shaped to accommodate a full width

clerestory strip window at its apex and have light fall on the organist, conductor and choir. Such detailed attention was given the quality of illumination, but all through clear glass, perhaps in acknowledgement of Calvinist austerity.

VENTILATING THE AUDITORIUM

Good lighting and ventilation are indispensable for human comfort, and at Welkom-Wes these two requirements were co-ordinated. Along the cloisters, fresh air is admitted by way of strip windows at floor level and, unusually, by a horizontal plane of pivot windows bridging the space between the top of the screen wall of the cloister and the soffit of the exterior down-stand beam of the galleries above. On the galleries, the same beam is modelled externally with a sill and recess designed as the *embouchure* and the air flow is adjustable internally by way of long and narrow horizontal wooden shutters in the alignment of the walls, hinged at the top of the throat, which is recessed at knee level (Fig 13).

Stale air rises, enabling egress through