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A Brad Pitt-narrated documentary about restoring the Unity Temple will soon be available for streaming

By [Matt Hickman](#) • October 21, 2020 • [Media](#), [Midwest](#), [On View](#)



(Tom Rossiter)

A new feature-length documentary film profiling the meticulous, Harboe Architects-led restoration of Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois, will be available to stream for a limited time on Vimeo starting October 30. This special preview screening/fundraising period will conclude on November 15 with a panel discussion hosted by filmmaker Lauren Levine discussing the documentary and the momentous effort to preserve one of Wright's most iconic early works for future generations. Virtual tickets for the film, titled Unity Temple: Frank Lloyd Wright's Modern Masterpiece, cost \$20 and include access to the Zoom-based panel.



Proceeds from ticket sales will help support four additional Wright sites in addition to Unity Temple: Taliesin, Taliesin West, Fallingwater, and the Hollyhock House in Los Angeles. (Despite being geographically disparate, all five of these works collectively comprise a single UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with the Frederick C. Robie House, the Herbert and Katherine Jacobs House, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.)



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Narrated by [Brad Pitt](#), *Unity Temple: Frank Lloyd Wright's Modern Masterpiece* dives into the rich history of the reinforced concrete (a then-audacious choice) house of worship. Commissioned in 1905, Unity Temple was completed in 1908 following a string of construction delays, modifications, technical difficulties, and cost overruns.

Wright, 41-years-old at the time of the church's completion, had settled in Oak Park, a growing suburb directly west of Chicago, in the late 1880s. Wright took on numerous residential projects in and around Oak Park during the beginning of the 20th century including early Prairie-style homes. Wildly experimental for its time, Unity Temple was not only Wright's first major public building—it's also widely considered his most significant work and a vastly influential forebear of the modern architecture movement. "Unity Temple makes an entirely new architecture—and is the first expression of it. That is my contribution to modern architecture," Wright later said.

The project was also a deeply personal commission for the young architect, who was a member of the Unitarian Universalist congregation that the church was built to serve. (Unity Temple's predecessor, the Oak Park Unity Church, was destroyed in a fire in 1905.)

Over the decades, Unity Temple has suffered from various structural problems and maintenance woes, namely water damage. Early efforts to safeguard the church led to the formation of the Unity Temple Restoration Foundation ([UTRF](#))

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in 1970, a secular, preservation-minded organization that, thirty years later, began devising a comprehensive restoration master plan in partnership with the church. Unity Temple was named both a National Historic Landmark and added to the National Register of Historic Places the same year UTRF was established.



Designed and constructed at a time when church architecture remained bound to tradition, Unity Temple is widely regarded as paving the way for modern architecture. (Tom Rossiter)

Fast-forward nearly four wear, tear, and leak-filled decades later to 2009 when the UTRF's push to preserve the ailing church became all the more urgent—and widely-publicized—with its inclusion on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places List. In 2015, Unity Temple closed to the public and restoration work kicked off in earnest. The multi-year, \$25 million effort, which involved painstaking interior and exterior work including on the building's art glass windows and multitude of leak-prone flat roofs, was completed and reopened in the summer of 2017 for both worship and guided public tours led by the Chicago-based Frank Lloyd



Wright Trust. The restoration was met with widespread acclaim and much like with the church's drawn-out construction, the patience of all involved certainly paid off.

Over the course of the documentary's 55-minute run time, Levine chronicles the reawakening of Unity Temple with input and insight from the restoration team including lead architect Gunny Harboe, members of the Unity Temple congregation, and a range of architectural historians and critics including Paul Goldberger and Blair Kamin. As for Pitt, he steps in to narrate "the architect's philosophies," according to a press release.

"I hoped to convey a window into Wright's mind, beyond the often repeated autobiographical mainstream material, so that we could better understand Wright's guiding philosophy and intent that his buildings reflect the people who use them, said Levine. "It was important to capture both the tremendous task and details of the restoration itself as well as the spirit, diversity and commitment of the congregation who continue to bring the building to life."

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