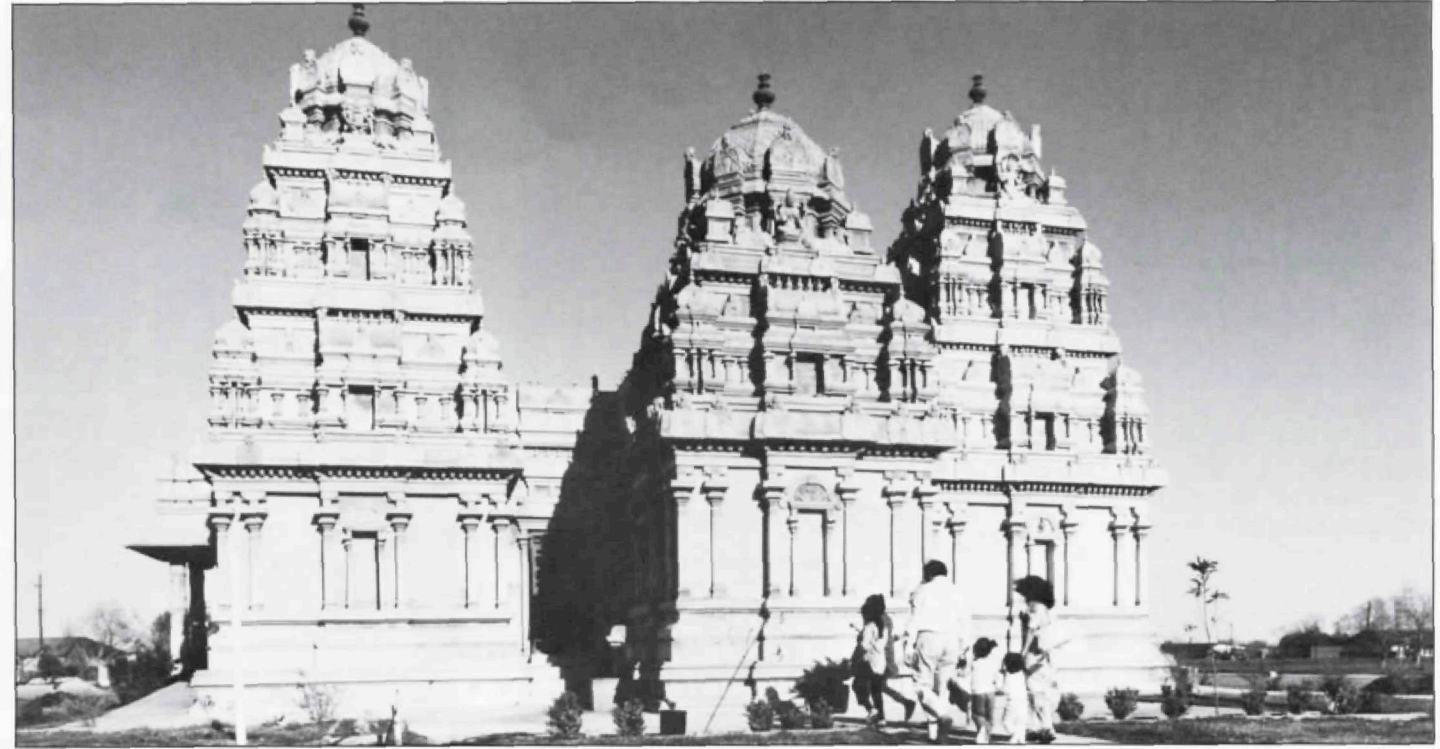


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Hindu Memories of Home American Suburban Style: The Sri Meenach Temple, Pearland

Malcolm Quantrill

On a Sunday morning in January, Bruce Webb and I set out into the uncertain Texas climate, through the certainty of the Houston suburbs in search of a Hindu temple in Pearland. As a Londoner, memories of Southall stirred in my muddled morning brain. In London, I recalled, temples have been created in old movie palaces and sometimes even disused churches. But I could remember nothing of the spectacle that the Sri Meenachi Temple promised to be. I have many Indian friends, some of them Hindu, but I have never been to India. My only guide to what I might expect at Pearland was Louis Moore's unenthusiastic article, "Hinduism in Houston" (*Houston Chronicle*, 17 August 1985), which told me all I knew about this Texas center of Hindu culture. Moore had been intrigued by the fact that the Houston Hindu community embraces the proselytizing Hare Krishnas, and disappointed that "hard statistics on the actual number of Hindus here are unavailable." Perhaps, I pondered, the local priests thought Moore was from Immigration. On the other hand, it may be difficult to count if you have to include all the incarnations.



Paul Hester, Houston

In fact, Hindus regard themselves as the manifestation of the world's oldest religion, and believe as such that it is pointless to make converts since all other religions stem from Hinduism and owe their existence and ritual practices to Hindu origins. So the Sri Meenachi Temple has to be seen as a representation of 4,000 years of uninterrupted form and content. That surely is the meaning of replicating in miniature in Pearland a celebrated temple of India, the Hindu homeland. So we must be dealing with the ancient rather than the modern here. And yet the result is postmodern in a most astonishing way. Of course, in part it has to do with the confusion of scale, with what is vast and monumental in the original being rendered as a suburban miniature. Once inside the temple there is nothing of the intended magnificence of the exterior, which in fact is only

impressive from the middle-distance, since this brick-and-concrete reproduction of history is neither true to size nor material. For on removing our shoes and entering this holy place, we find ourselves inside a flat-ceilinged suburban box, an impression unchanged by the profusion of household gods. The holy water and incense might remind me that these Catholic practices have a Hindu root, but the overall effect is of a Tupperware party in Tomball, so difficult is it today to distinguish one kind of kitsch from another. The social center, which now masks the original shrine on the site, is undeniably postmodern classic, and the site model for the master plan reveals more of the monumental dolls' house approach. What it really needs is the masterly touch of someone like Edwin Lutyens. ■

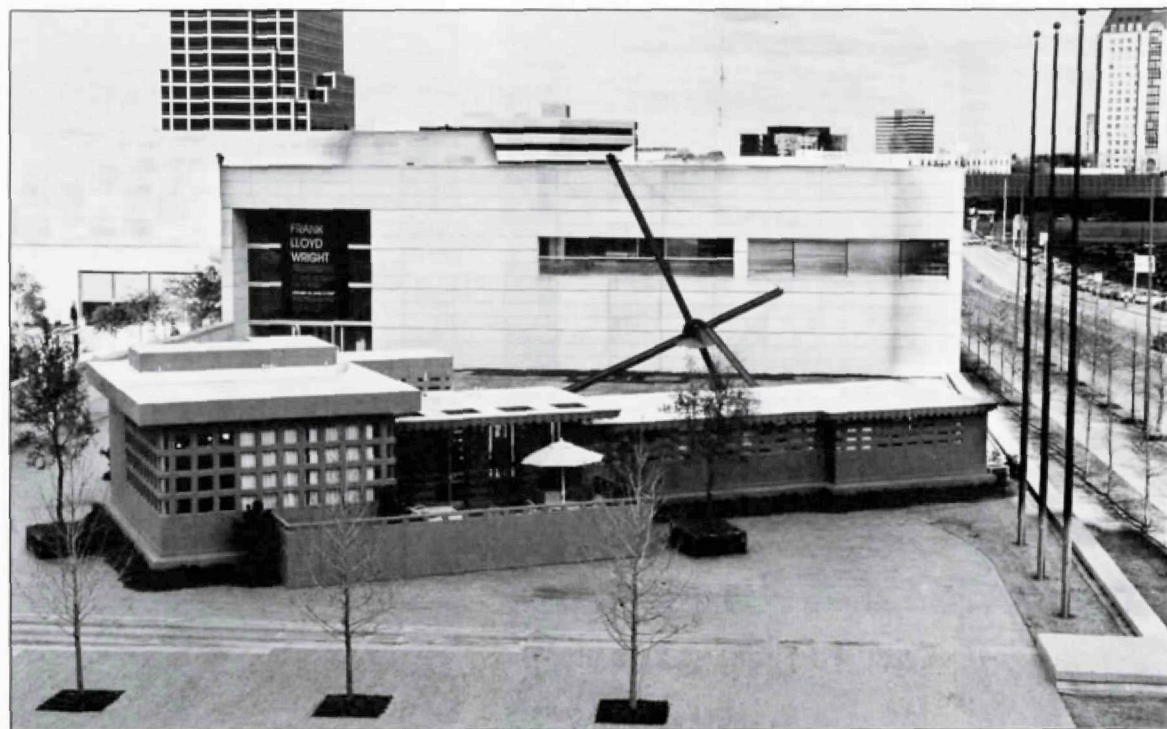
Citations

Frank Lloyd Wright: In the Realm of Ideas

An exhibition organized by the Scottsdale Arts Center Association and the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation
The Dallas Museum of Art and The Trammel Crow Center Pavilion, Dallas
19 January - 17 April 1988

Reviewed by Jay C. Henry

Contrary to the prevailing popular conception of modern architecture as an avant-garde phenomenon, Frank Lloyd Wright was a populist, essentially in harmony with the basic currents of American culture. He is probably the one modern architect known by name to the average American citizen, something of a folk hero whose work might be expected to attract popular, as opposed to professional and critical, attention. The exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art caters to this populist image. This is profoundly apparent in watching the visitors moving with reverent curiosity through the three rooms of photographs, drawings, models, and furniture pieces which comprise the exhibition, culminating in the visit to a Usonian Automatic House reconstructed on the museum's Ross Avenue Plaza. Although the primary objective seems to be the cultivation of this popular hagiography, the exhibition is not without stimulus and reward to professional architects and serious students of architecture, for although many of the items are familiar parts of Wright's corpus of work, there are sufficient new or little-known artifacts to reward even the most



Barth Tillotson

Usonian Automatic House installed on the Ross Avenue Plaza of the Dallas Museum of Art, 1988, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect

informed cognoscenti. Unfortunately, however, the organization of the exhibition does more to foster reverent appreciation of Wright's presumed genius than a critical understanding of his work.

The exhibition is organized around four themes from Wright's writings: "The Destruction of the Box," "The Nature of the Site," "Materials and Methods," and "Building for Democracy." As Wright's discourse was more romantic poetry than systematic exposition, these themes provide at best a highly subjective schema for organizing the work. Within each section, work from all periods of Wright's career is juxtaposed without explanation, and with only his own words for commentary. The lay observer is given no instruction in the chronology of

the master's practice, and doubtless comes away impressed but confused by the plenitude of riches. Projects are not distinguished from executed work, nor are changes in the course of design development described.

More disturbing is the uniform presentation of all of Wright's work as equally reflective of genius. In fact, of course, most dispassionate critics find serious faults in much of his late work, when his advancing age and the obsequious deference of the Taliesin Fellowship blunted his critical faculties. The Marin Civic Center and the Arizona Capitol Project are both badly flawed in detail if not in basic conception, coming off as ornamental aberrations of his late Disneyland period. The effect is to

pander to the public's taste for kitsch rather than to cultivate its appreciation for Wright's legitimate masterpieces.

The Usonian Automatic House is clearly the *pièce de résistance* of the exhibition. The Usonian paradigm of the 1930s was altered little in Wright's post-war practice, and usually avoids the bizarre geometry and eccentric ornament that disfigure much of his late work. Visitors will find the Usonian Automatic to be small in size and - as typical with Wright - small in scale; almost cozy, in fact, which is not an inappropriate perception for a populist architect to cultivate. ■