

WHAT SIMPLICITY CONCEALS, THE LIGHT REVEALS

James Turrell and Leslie K. Elkins open a Friends meeting house to the sky

BY PATRICK PETERS

AT 1318 WEST 26TH STREET IN HOUSTON'S WORKING-CLASS NEIGHBORHOOD OF SHADY ACRES, just within audible range of the hum of cars speeding along the North Loop, an austere but refined worship space has been completed for the Live Oak Friends Meeting. Set among modest wood-frame cottages, auto repair shops, and the odd mobile home, all shaded by a heavy tree canopy, the Quaker group's meeting house offers those within it an unexpected opening to the sky through a bright galvalume roof.

To the few passersby on this fringe of Houston's Heights, the outward appearance of the meeting house presents a simplified representation of the complex visual, social, and spiritual phenomena taking place within. The exterior of the meeting house is distinguished by its self-effacing effort to nest, despite its large mass, within its humble surroundings. Symmetrical in its long east-west axis and employing broad overhanging eaves, cement clapboard siding, and strict platonic geometry punctuated by equally-spaced, alternating windows and doors, the spiritual house has a plainness that unapologetically invites association with the straightforwardness of nearby utility sheds while recalling the deep shade of distant ranch houses. Alternatively, it also demonstrates the complex synthesis of intentions possible when the utilitarian expectations of a Society of Friends meeting seeking a permanent home embraces a well-known artist's minimalist aesthetic. The organizing principle of this joint pursuit was the elusive Quaker ethic of overt simplicity embodying inner spirituality.

The 100-plus members of the Live Oak Friends Meeting, an itinerate group who have grown accustomed to gathering in appropriated spaces such as community centers, dance halls, and borrowed churches, had no desire to erect a "steeple house" — their term for a worship space that transcends its purpose to become a religious monument. Nor did they intend to build a destination for art pilgrims. However, when they were approached in 1995 by Houston gallery-owner Hiram Butler, who represents the work of Arizona-based James Turrell, they were open to the consideration of a gift by the world-renowned light artist, who is himself a Quaker. For the new meeting house, Turrell evolved the simplest of intentions: to open the ceiling and let the outdoors come in. Seeking the opportunity to merge his artwork with a renewed spiritual interest in his childhood Quaker upbringing, Turrell devel-

oped what had been an ongoing project of his, the creation of what he terms a Skyspace. Where a steeple might be found objectionable because it focuses too literally on man's aspiration to reach the cosmos, the Skyspace — effectively a void or anti-steeple — erases the element of human intervention and opens the meeting house for direct perception and contemplation of creation.

What the outward simplicity of this newest of Houston's artwork/worship hybrids conceals is the complex cross-pollination of a religious ministry with the desire to bring into being a major new work of art. This desire, felt by patrons and foundations in Houston's visual arts community, enabled the Live Oak Friends to leverage their modest fund-raising potential into major outside gifts that totaled two-thirds of the approximately \$1.5 million required for the ambitious building/artwork.

Turrell's Skyspace satisfies the two, often contradictory, agendas of faith and art. It frames the sky to bring its light into the central room of the 80-foot-long, 40-foot-wide meeting house. In his precise manner of shaping this light, the artist created two visual phenomena. Due to its angled path, the sun's movement through the sky produces dramatic phenomena of changing color and spatial perception from the 30 minutes before through the 30 minutes after sunset. The first phenomenon is an uncommon deepening of the sky's hue from a robin's egg blue to deep violet, all while the saturation of color intensifies. The second phenomenon is a progressive flattening over time of the depth of the sky's vault, which eventually collapses within the dematerialized Skyspace. This happens in part as a result of a dynamic contrast of the changing cool color of the sky when seen against the constant level of a warm, pinkish light that issues from a cold-cathode-tube cove illumination on the interior. The square central room, flanked at either end by two smaller rooms, is twice as wide as its 19-foot height, a horizontal emphasis that enhances the spatial effect.

The experience leads the viewer toward meditation. The slow and patient movement of celestial and atmospheric elements through the central room's aperture induces one to consider the world beyond its four walls. Likewise, the influx of fresh air and the accompanying

James Turrell's Skyspace, a void in the ceiling of the Live Oak Meeting House, gives the building a direct connection with the outside world.



Drawings courtesy Leslie K. Elkins

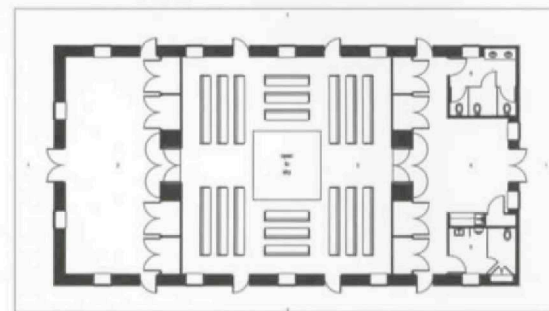
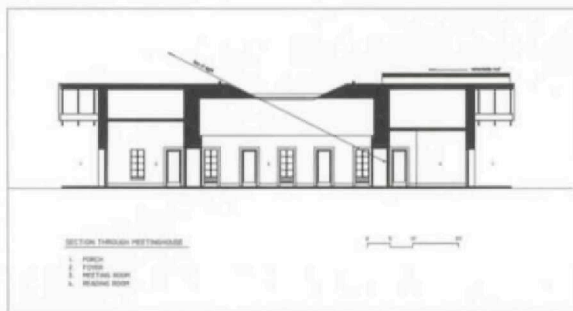


Photo by Ben Thorne



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Top: Renderings of the Live Oak Meeting House show the artful simplicity of its design, and the careful consideration of the angles at which light enters the central meeting hall.

Middle: The shed-like appearance of the Meeting House belies the complexity of its construction, which entailed a rigorous consideration of structure, climate control, lighting, and waterproofing.

Bottom: Despite its mass, the Meeting House makes an attempt to fit quietly into its humble surroundings.

change of temperature within the room due to the outside elements entering through the open void offer a way of grounding one's visual experience of the celestial within a tactile experience of ambient temperature and current weather conditions. Although simple to perceive, the structure's ephemeral experiences are difficult, if not impossible, to capture in pigment or on film.

While the use of daylight in the Live Oak installation invites the metaphor of divine presence, Turrell employs light as a material without bias regarding its source. Since all light is the product of combustion — whether of hydrogen in a distant star or of tungsten in a glass globe — it is all equally available as a medium for use. Turrell's work for the Live Oak Friends Meeting joins an earlier permanent installation of his work in Houston, one that employs only electric light sources. That 2000 installation, "The Light Inside," commissioned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, capitalizes on an underground tunnel connecting the Caroline Wiess Law Building and Rafael Moneo's Audrey Jones Beck Building. Like the Friends Meeting House's Skyspace, "The Light Inside" operates around a basic concern for simplicity.

What is required to fulfill the promise of this simplicity, however, is anything but simple. In the meeting house, Turrell's intent to create a featureless frame surrounding a 12-foot-square piece of the sky demanded a rigorous consideration of the prosaic elements of structure, climate control, lighting, and weatherproofing, elements that can often undermine a minimalist sensibility. Traces of this struggle are found in the construction documents calling for the ceiling of the meeting house to taper magically to a knife's edge at the Skyspace opening. Architects and builders alike understand the difficulty associated with trying to eliminate visual clutter in pursuit of a refined and minimal visual experience. This effort was supported at the meeting house first by concealing the structural steel frame, air conditioning, and indirect lighting in a two-foot-thick mass, thereby reducing the visual palette on the interior to plaster walls, a shallow vaulted wallboard ceiling, pine floors, and maple trim. Secondly, the effort was sponsored by the careful handling of the intersection of these materials. Architect Leslie K. Elkins, whose previous work with minimalist director and designer Robert

Wilson at his creative compound in Watermill, Long Island, provided beneficial training for this challenge, collaborated closely with Turrell to effect this simplicity. Frank Briscoe, project manager on the building for W.S. Bellows Construction Corporation, was also instrumental in accomplishing the project. Briscoe shared Elkins' commitment to the intellectually and physically demanding practice of refined material handling.

Further contributing to the viewer's perception of the accomplishment achieved at the Live Oak Friends installation is Turrell's insistence on preserving the pure spatial illusion of the light art. The Live Oak Friends have been told to keep visitors from viewing the interior of the central room while the motorized cover for the roof aperture is being opened or closed. This suggests the price paid to be the custodians of a work of art. Further, all interruptions to the line of sight from the interior to the sky were obsessively eliminated, both by acts of architectural detailing and by the removal of three mature trees whose branches could be seen through the open Skyspace, this last a fact that proved troubling to many among the Friends Meeting. The merger of art and faith is not without some compromises.

The drama played out by Turrell's open roof reveals his sophisticated understanding of the physics of light and human optics. It demonstrates natural light's capacity to both locate a person in a particular place and time and, simultaneously, connect a person to the universal structure of the solar system.

Beyond the presentation of the aperture, the demands placed upon the meeting house are somewhat more limited. The Live Oak Friends Meeting is what is known as an "unprogrammed" congregation, with no clergy and a service that consists of an hour-long atmosphere of silence. Infrequent breaks to the silence are provided by "leadings," incidental acts of members moved by God to speak. These functions require no specific spatial configuration. Architect Elkins' understated design works to ennoble this coming together in fellowship by its straightforward but dignified clarity of organization, construction, and use. The power of the Skyspace lies in its capacity to transcend the steeple house tradition, putting those gathered together into a communion with their inner voice. ■