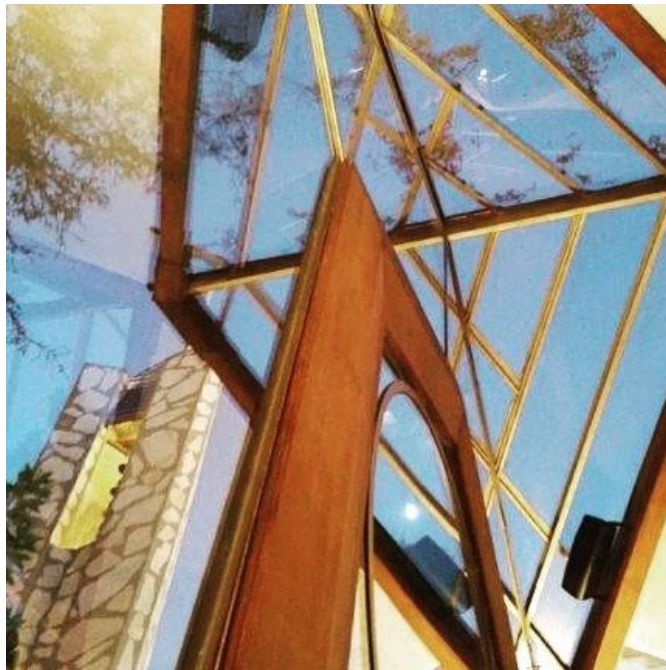




*Our Ministries in View:*  
*The Living Parable of the*  
*Wayfarer's Chapel*

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With some of the extra time I've had during the safer-at-home orders, I have been able to do a bit of a deep-dive into the Chapel's history and its architectural significance. I found a lot of interesting tidbits, so I thought I'd share a few of them with you all. I have been particularly struck by the intention and symbolism behind the structure of the Wayfarers Chapel. So, here is a bit of what I learned combined with my own personal musings on why it matters.

Upon seeing the Chapel and its breathtaking views for the first time (or the 100<sup>th</sup> time), virtually everyone is struck by its beauty and serenity. It is one of those "thin spaces" where any distance or separation between the spiritual world and the earthly plane seems to barely exist at all. Despite this visceral reaction to the space, many people who walk through its doors are unaware of just how deeply, spiritually symbolic every aspect of the Chapel really is.



The Chapel was built as a place for weary travelers to stop, rest, and give glory to God for the wonder and beauty of all creation. When Elizabeth Schellenberg first began to imagine the dream of the Chapel, the Palos Verdes peninsula was mostly open farmland with a two-lane gravel road along the coast.

In the photos from the early years, the Chapel (pre-maturation of its signature grove of trees) stands out against the stark landscape. Today, the Chapel is nestled in a grove of trees and it has slowly but surely become integrated into the landscape as the world grew up around it. A newspaper article from the day after the Chapel was dedicated, notes that in its first week open to the public (in May of 1951), 3,862 people visited the Chapel. The article recommend that you visit, giving directions of "to

get there, just drive out the coast road until you spot it on the righthand side of the road.”<sup>1</sup> These directions aren’t quite as helpful today. But if you know what to look for, they’ll get you there.

From the very beginning, the Chapel has attracted and welcomed locals and travelers alike into its sanctuary. However, because the Chapel was built for the wayfarer and is open to all, many visitors mistake it as being a sacred space with no official affiliation. But of course, that couldn’t be further from the truth. The Wayfarers Chapel is Swedenborgian not only in its events and services, but to its very core; every stone, shape, and tree of the Chapel is theologically significant and imbued with Swedenborgian symbolism.

In the *Self-Guiding Walk Through the Gardens and Sanctuary of Wayfarers Chapel* pamphlet, the Chapel’s symbolism is described as:



“The Chapel is a living parable. The harmony of glass, wood, and stone, combined with the beauty of the natural surroundings, symbolizes the integral relationship of our inner world of mind and spirit with God’s universe.

In the Chapel, the stone beneath our feet and the rock at our side, ancient building materials, represent God’s truth on which faith is built. The walls shelter us from the everyday world, drawing our focus to the altar, opening our inner world to God’s presence. The glass enclosure lets us see the world of nature, and at the same time, allows us to experience the inner world of spirit. The open Bible on the altar signifies God’s continuing presence with us. The candles, lighted for all services, symbolize the light of truth shining forth to guide our spiritual journey. The circle reminds us of the oneness of God, the ongoingness of life and our striving toward wholeness. The triangle represents the threefold essence of God: creating, saving, and sustaining us on our life’s journey. The trees surrounding us represent our

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<sup>1</sup> *San Pedro News-Pilot* San Pedro, California 14 May 1951, p. 3.

lives as we strive to live and grow Godward. Just as trees need water, sunshine, and soil to grow, so do we need truth, love, and knowledge to nurture and sustain our growth.”<sup>2</sup>

Lloyd Wright, the Chapel architect, was not a Swedenborgian and was not particularly familiar with Swedenborgian theology. However, in the ministry of his architecture he preached a uniting and an integrating with the natural world. His architectural works are some of the foremost examples of organic architecture, which has the aim of creating structures that are in harmony with their natural surroundings. When he designed the Chapel, Wright made it so that the redwood beams and the steel mullions would mimic the trees outside. This allows the frame of the Chapel to merge with the redwood trees, creating a space with the feeling of being simultaneously within and without. Of being between two worlds. The glass enclosure was designed to be “as inconspicuous as possible” making it so that the redwood trees surrounding it would appear to be the framework of the structure.

Eric Lloyd Wright, architect of the Chapel’s Visitors Center and son of Lloyd Wright, spoke about this parallel in an interview saying, “the building is just like the trees outside growing up and the building has become part of the landscape and the landscape is part of the building and you can’t really separate them. They have to have each other to exist.” Eric describes the connection that the Chapel has with nature as an example of how humans can live together in communion with nature. In his view, this union with nature is why the Chapel has such a profound effect on people, saying “they don’t know why, or exactly what it is, but there is something about that building that is special.”

It is a transient space with the streams of sunlight constantly moving, animating and inspiriting the sanctuary. While sitting in the pews, one can gaze up into the limitless sky with the birds flying overhead. And when standing at the entrance or on the altar, one can witness the steady cadence of the ocean. Lloyd Wright explained that the glass enclosure allows not only the space beyond the walls to be seen, but for “infinity to be observed.” His intention was that visitors would be able to experience the natural growth of the forest, the expanse of the sky, and the majesty of the sea, all while remaining under the protection of the structure.

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<sup>2</sup> *Self Guided Walking Tour* pamphlet, Wayfarer’s Chapel, Rancho Palos Verdes. 2018.

The purpose of the structure of the Chapel is to let the natural surrounds speak through it. The Chapel offers protection and form, but the trees, sky, and sunlight are what make it what it is. This interaction is an impressive illustration of the interaction between the soul and the body. Life flows from God into our spirit, and from our spirit into our body. Our body, our form, was created so that it can uniquely receive the living forces flowing in through the soul from God. As above, so below. In this way, the Chapel acts as an illustration of a correspondence. There is a dynamic, on-going connection between the structure and its natural surround. Whatever is happening in the natural world around it is revealed through the structure. The effect of this is felt immediately and intensely.

Eric Wright described in an interview that the Chapel has the effect on him that it “gives me peace, gives me quiet, gives me beauty, all the things that I need to rejoice in being here on this earth. We have enough things to worry about. What we need are elements in our lives that lift us and the chapel is one of those elements.” The Chapel serves as not only a meeting place for our spirit to connect with God in a way that many of the places and things in our lives don’t, but it also inspires within us the importance of our connection with the Divine.

In an interview from 1976, Lloyd Wright recalled that during the construction of the Chapel, someone had told him of a chapel that Swedenborg had written about that was made of living trees. I wasn’t able to find any indication as to where or what the passage was, but after some searching, I am taking a guess that it is this passage about a chapel on “a third earth in the starry heaven” from *Earths in the Universe* §151:

“They then represented their sanctuaries...they are constructed of trees, not cut down, but growing in their native soil. They said that on their earth there were trees of wonderful growth and height. These from their beginnings they arrange in order, so that they serve for porticos and walks, and by cutting and pruning the branches when they are tender, they fit and prepare them so that while they are growing they may intertwine and unite to make the base and floor of the sanctuary, and rise on the sides for the walls, and bend above into arches for the roof.

By these means they construct the sanctuary with admirable art, elevated high above the earth, and they also prepare an ascent into it by successive branches of the trees extending out and firmly connected. Moreover they adorn the sanctuary without and within in various ways, by bending the leafy bows into various forms. Thus they build entire groves.

But what these sanctuaries are within, I was not permitted to see. It was only told to me that the light of their sun is let into them through apertures between the branches, and is here and there transmitted through crystals, by which the light falling on the walls is variegated into colors like the rainbow.”<sup>3</sup>

Although the entirety of the Wayfarers Chapel isn’t made of living trees, they certainly rise on the sides to form the walls and bend into arches above where sunlight streams in between the branches. So, I’d say the spirits from the third earth in the starry heaven would be well pleased with it.



With the ferns and orchids growing inside, the trees just beyond the glass, and the sunlight constantly shifting, sometimes it really does feel like the Chapel is alive. And in a time where I am constantly hearing people claim that churches are dying, or religion is dying, neither could feel further from the truth from where I am standing. The Chapel is alive and timeless because it is integrated into and

interconnected with the world around it, and it is deeply rooted in principles of Divine love and wisdom. Perhaps, for those who feel their church is dying, the living parable of the Chapel may serve as insight and inspiration for them.

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<sup>3</sup> Swedenborg, E. *Earths in the Universe*. 1874. London. Swedenborg Society.