

HOW THE STRANGE LOOKING ORIGINAL BUILDING FOR THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF AMES CAME ABOUT

Wesley I. Shank, March 2013

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames occupies a long complex structure on the west side of North Hyland Avenue. The middle part, the original building built in 1969-1970, hardly looked like a house of religious assembly. (See **1-4** of illustrations at end,) To some it might have looked like a cluster of farm buildings: a couple of short concrete silos with a tall shed in back. The main entrance doors brought you directly into in a large, low-ceilinged, irregularly shaped room that felt like a basement. In fact, it was a basement, dug into the hill in back, where it had two shallow curved alcoves for people to gather. One had a fireplace. Beside you to your left, the backs of the two silos bulged into the room, with an angular stairwell between them with steps leading down. This large room was at the heart of the building. In the middle of the room a pillar obstructed the view. These were my impressions of the building just after it was finished.

Years later I became a member of the Fellowship and, since I am an architectural historian and a retired architect, I wanted to discover how this unusual building came about. How did the congregation reach their decision to build? How did they determine what they wanted to build? How did they implement that decision? To answer these questions I have tried to document the history of the designing architect's work with the congregation, the architectural engineer's work implementing construction, and the fundraising efforts of the congregation itself that made it all possible.

The history of the Unitarian Fellowship of Ames, as the congregation was called then, began in 1949 with ten members. They met in rented quarters on alternate Sundays, conducting the services themselves and teaching the religious-education classes for their children. By January 1962 the congregation had grown large enough to consider having a building of their own. Roy E. Warman, chairman of the Building Committee, and Gordon Danielson, treasurer of the congregation, surveyed the members and reported that, although their financial support was considerable, it was not yet enough to move ahead with building plans. They recommended waiting a year or two, hoping for expanded membership and basis for support. Two years later,

in 1964, the first two of the lots that make up the present site were purchased, providing a frontage of 160 feet. A strip of land was added at the back two years later, making the depth 230 feet. The location across the street from the Iowa State University campus was convenient for students, but the steep upward slope from the street was to complicate the design of the building and add to its cost.

The Unitarian denomination in North America, which appeared in New England in the late 1700s, rejected the Trinity, as did the Deists, and strongly supported the separation of church and state on which the U.S. Constitution is based. As the denomination grew in the 1800s, it helped bring about many important social reforms. In their beliefs, the Unitarians have continued to evolve, and by the last century accepted the spirituality and wisdom of many religious traditions and the rationalism of Humanism. During the 1960s, the Unitarian Fellowship of Ames was strongly Humanistic.

The Building Committee Report of June 1966 noted that the hoped for increased membership numbers had come about, but the increased financial support was coming more slowly. Some 60 to 70 people were attending Sunday services with about 56 children in Sunday school. Incorporating the findings of the Religious Education Committee, the committee set forth the space needs for the building. Working from their present membership of 86 adults (55 contributing units) and, following an accepted rule-of-thumb, assuming that the membership would double within a few years after building completion, the Building Committee decided on these requirements: a meeting hall to seat 150 people, a nursery, eight religious-education classrooms for a total of 95 children, a small office space, a kitchenette, and such service rooms as rest rooms, storage areas, and mechanical equipment rooms. I recall the middle 1960s as years of considerable growth in Iowa State University as the baby-boomer generation entered the country's colleges and universities. The report suggested an expected 50% growth in Ames population in ten years and a greater growth in the congregation than could be provided for now. The "realistic building cost" that they arrived at was \$75,000. Thus their 5435 square foot building would cost \$13.80 per square foot. On October 2, 1966, the Finance Committee, composed of Gordon Danielson, George Karas, and Roy Warman, set \$100,000 as the goal for their funding drive, but \$14,000 of the amount was to cover the cost of the land.

One could say that the process of designing the building began with the architecture students at Iowa State University, with their professor coming in after them. To get an idea of what their building might be, the Building Committee took advantage of Iowa State University's tradition of community service and arranged with the Department of Architecture to have its senior students prepare designs for the building as an exercise. The students presented their individual designs to an appreciative congregation on May 1, 1966. Their professor was Tore E. Bjornstad. (See 5.) He probably asked afterward to be considered for the commission. A man in his early forties, he would have told them that he was an architect registered to practice in the state of Iowa and a member of the American Institute of Architects, and that he held the title of Visiting Professor at Iowa State university. Probably he also told them that he was born in Norway, had come to this country as a young man to study with Frank Lloyd Wright, and, just before coming to Ames, had been senior designer with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Montréal.

During the summer he prepared a design for the building and presented it to the Building Committee in November 1966. He included a statement explaining the rationale for his design and a construction cost estimate of \$100,000. His model and a floor plan show the cluster of elements that make up the design. (See 6 and 7.) The large element with its tall conical roof dominated the cluster. It was the meeting hall. The two-story element at the back with curved walls and an undulating roof held religious-education classrooms on the second floor and included the nursery on the first. The two smaller one-story, flat-roofed oval elements at the front contained more classrooms. It was not clear how the four elements were connected to each other, nor were the materials of construction indicated. Bjornstad said that his inspiration for the design was the clustered huts of a primitive African village. That fall the congregation approved the general concept of the design and gave him the commission, and a few months later on February 1, 1967, entered into a written contract with him. A memorandum to the congregation titled "Building Funding Plans," dated February 5, 1967, and author not given, states that Bjornstad's plan "meets or exceeds all the space requirements specified by our Building Committee," and that "the imaginative use of site and material" had the support of the Building and the Executive Committees and the membership. Mention is made only of concrete work of a sort

requiring a contractor with special experience and nothing else about building materials. Mention is also made of conferences with representatives of James Thompson and Sons, Ames building contractors, resulting in preliminary cost estimates of \$100,000 for the building. This would amount to \$15 per square foot, in comparison to \$23.50 for churches recently built in Ames. This \$100,000 estimate represents an increase, because the Finance Committee's October 6, 1966, \$100,000 estimate was for the building *and* the \$14,000 value of the lot.

Bjornstad left Ames in May 1967. He had accepted a position at the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario, to teach architecture and research the use of computers in architectural design. (This was fourteen years before the first personal computers appeared.) He promised to complete the final architectural drawings by September 1, so construction could start in the fall, and the congregation continued its fundraising efforts. He failed to meet the September 1 deadline and, in December 1967, mailed six drawings that still were not the final ones. (See **8**, **9**, and **10**.) The floor plans and the cross section show major changes in the shape of the two-story element. In addition, they show that he added a fifth element by putting a flat roof over the outdoor space that was in the middle of the other elements. He extended part of that new space into the first floor of the two-story element by removing the wall between them and replacing it with a column to carry the construction above. The new space was labeled Community-Study Area, but it also provided the indoor connection between original four elements missing in the first design. I described this room that at the beginning. Its floor area and its length and width were nearly the same as the Meeting Hall. The total floor area of the building at this time would, by my estimate, have been about 7,555 square feet. That was about 40 percent more than the 5,439 square feet that the Building Committee established in its 1966 report.

These drawings provided the first indications of the materials of construction. Most of the exterior walls were reinforced concrete, including those of the second story, and many interior walls were as well. First- and second-story floors were reinforced concrete as was the roof of the Community-Study Area. "Mill deck" (tongue-and-grooved wood deck three or more inches thick with no joists) was indicated for the roofs of the two oval-shaped classrooms. The roof of the two-story element and that of the Meeting Hall were simply noted as wood construction. The

extent of reinforced-concrete walls is the noteworthy point. The drawings suggest that the projecting thin vertical bands these walls now have were intended.

Bjornstad visited Ames in March 1968 to meet with the Building Committee. By this time the congregation realized that it could not afford to build the Meeting Hall, and Bjornstad set about creating the abbreviated design that was actually built. A sketch plan dating from about May 1968 shows this design with the Community-Study Area labeled as Meeting Hall and the original oval Meeting Hall omitted. (See **11**.) Although the square footage of this abbreviated design was only about 6 % greater than what the Building Committee had specified in the June 1966 report, the May 1968 estimated building cost was \$113,000.

The front elevation dating from this time, with the slanting walls of the two-story element, shows how the design had developed. (See **12**.) During further development of the design, Bjornstad made some changes in building materials, although the curving, exposed reinforced-concrete walls continued as a design feature of both the exterior and interior of the building at the lower story. Wood-frame construction was substituted for most of the concrete work of the second floor walls. The curious tilting walls and wide windows with rounded corners seen in the May 1968 exterior elevation did not appear in the final design. At last, in September, more than a year later than promised, his final working drawings reached the Building Committee. (See **13**.) The experience of James Thompson and Sons working with Bjornstad was that they were not able to get from him definite and detailed information on the building so that they could provide firm pricing for the work. They withdrew. The Building Committee, although generally satisfied with Bjornstad's final design, were dissatisfied with his repeated delays and inadequate drawings. They ended their relationship with him.

Late in 1968 the committee interviewed several other architects and Paul Lilly, an architectural engineer, and by December they engaged Lilly to take over. Born in Sioux City in 1923, he had received a degree in architectural engineering at Iowa State in 1947 and had set up a private engineering practice in Boone in 1961. He found that Bjornstad's site plan was inadequate. (See **14**.) The on-site parking at the front of the site – it shows in the 1966 model – was in violation of city zoning ordinances: front yard parking was not allowed. So Lilly moved the building closer

to the street and adapted it better to the slope by turning it a few degrees counterclockwise and, in the two oval rooms, by stepping the first floor down four feet. In other respects, however, the building followed Bjornstad's preliminary design, as the committee requested. In July 1969 Lilly completed the drawings and specifications necessary for construction. (See 15.) As Lilly recommended, the Building Committee chose Thorngren Construction Company of Boone as general contractor. Lilly negotiated costs with them and supervised the construction, which began in August 1969 and was completed in September 1970. Dedicated followed in October.

Architecturally, what was Tore Bjornstad trying to do, and how well did he do it? Let us consider first *artistic purposes*. His statement accompanying the presentation of his first design explains. This is what he wrote:

Religious buildings have always reflected the hopes, the beliefs and the aspirations of the people that build them.

Today we are faced with the challenge of providing a spiritual home which will reflect the profound spirit of the Unitarian Fellowship. The fellowship has few antedecedants to fall back on – in fact they don't even have a current dogma as a spiritual pillar. The basic motivation for the fellowship's religious activities seems to be a desire to cement the credibility of man's own integrity of spirit and motivation.

In being selected to design the new home for the Ames Unitarians the challenge became one of expressing that strength of spirit. How can one combine the buoyancy of their spirit and the rationality of their imagination into one building? How can one express the rhapsodizing minds of their children and at the same time deal with the routine technology of the average building contractor?

I feel that the building I have designed is all of these things – my hopes are that the building will lead us closer to an understanding of the beautiful organic harmonies that are inherent in the complexities which make up the path before us.

Here Bjornstad was describing his subjective reactions to the congregation and saying that he would try to express these reactions in the building. He believed that the inspiration that people received from it would guide them in their lives – “the path before us,” as he expressed it. Architects, as do painters, may use their work to communicate their feelings. This is what Bjornstad seemed to be saying here, and he seems to have been following the Neo-Expressionist theory of art popular among notable architects of the 1950s and 1960s. The shapes that they used in their buildings were usually dramatic and original, standing out visually from the surroundings

and creating memorable images. Reinforced concrete, which would take the shape of whatever it was poured into, was a preferred material of construction. (See 16.)

Artistically – esthetically – was the design successful? From the viewpoint of the congregation, I think it was, simply on the evidence that they accepted it. They had expected Bjornstad to come up with an original design, gave him the freedom to do so, and broadmindedly accepted the results. I believe that, in fact, what was more important to them about the design was not what it was, but what it was *not*. It did not look like a church building. Unitarians did not think of themselves, institutionally, as a (Christian) church. It was not traditional architecture. Unitarians were not traditional. Did the building inspire people in the way that Bjornstad described – as the result of *his* subjective responses to the congregation? I doubt it. To the contrary, what people draw from a work of art are *their* subjective responses, not necessarily those of the artist. He chose to express his feelings with a symbol: the grouped structures of a primitive African village. For some people at this time, the design seemed unrelated to the hopes, aspirations, and beliefs of Unitarians in a modern society. For some people, the building with its rounded rooms suggested towers and a fortress. And so on; the responses were widely varied. For me, as I have said, the building simply looked strange. After all, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

After the building was completed, I think that the congregation found the design of the multi-use space (Community-Study Area) esthetically unsuccessful. It was dark and with its low ceiling and gray concrete walls felt oppressive. If the two large skylights included in one of Bjornstad's designs had been installed, the room would have been improved, at least during daylight hours. (See 10.) In the congregation's archives I found no perspective sketches showing the inside of the building. They would have explained to the congregation how it would look. The first-floor plan dated May 1968 did show a possible seating arrangement for about 85 people in the multi-use space. (See 11.)

Now, let us consider the *functional* aspects of the building. Architecturally what was Tore Bjornstad trying to do? How well did he satisfy those requirements? Starting with his December 1966 model and floor plans, he presented his concept of the building and showed how it fulfilled the Building Committee's February 1966 list of functional requirements. His later

work with the committee, through September 1968, shows how he developed the building design in response to these aspects. Paul Lilly's responses show that Bjornstad dealt poorly with the site requirements. The fact, however, that the congregation accepted his design, even after it was abbreviated by omitting the separate Meeting Hall element with its high conical roof, and after it was slightly altered as suggested by Paul Lilly, is evidence that they considered that Bjornstad had substantially met their functional requirements. They even accepted the considerable increase in estimated construction cost and the Finance Committee set about raising the money.

To summarize, I would say that Tore Bjornstad accomplished only part of what he was trying to do. The fact that the building that he designed is basically what was built is the evidence of what he did accomplish, but that was only part of what he was trying to do. He was attempting to provide full architectural services as well and failed. Had he been able to, the design might have been better and not cost so much. Architectural engineer Paul Lilly was brought in to complete the job, but he was limited essentially to implementing Bjornstad's design. Thus the history of the congregation's working with Tore Bjornstad explains how this strange looking building came about.

My sources included: documents, photographs, architectural drawings, and other material in the archives of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames; black-line prints of Bjornstad's "final" architectural drawings, made available to me through the kindness of a former colleague who happened to have them; various public and archival records in Iowa and in Waterloo University, Ontario; comments from people who were members of the congregation while the building was planned, designed, and built; and conversations with a member of James Thompson and Sons' firm who worked with Bjornstad, and with an architect who had been a student of Bjornstad's at Iowa State University. I am grateful to all who have helped me. I knew Bjornstad as a colleague in the Department of Architecture when he was visiting professor.

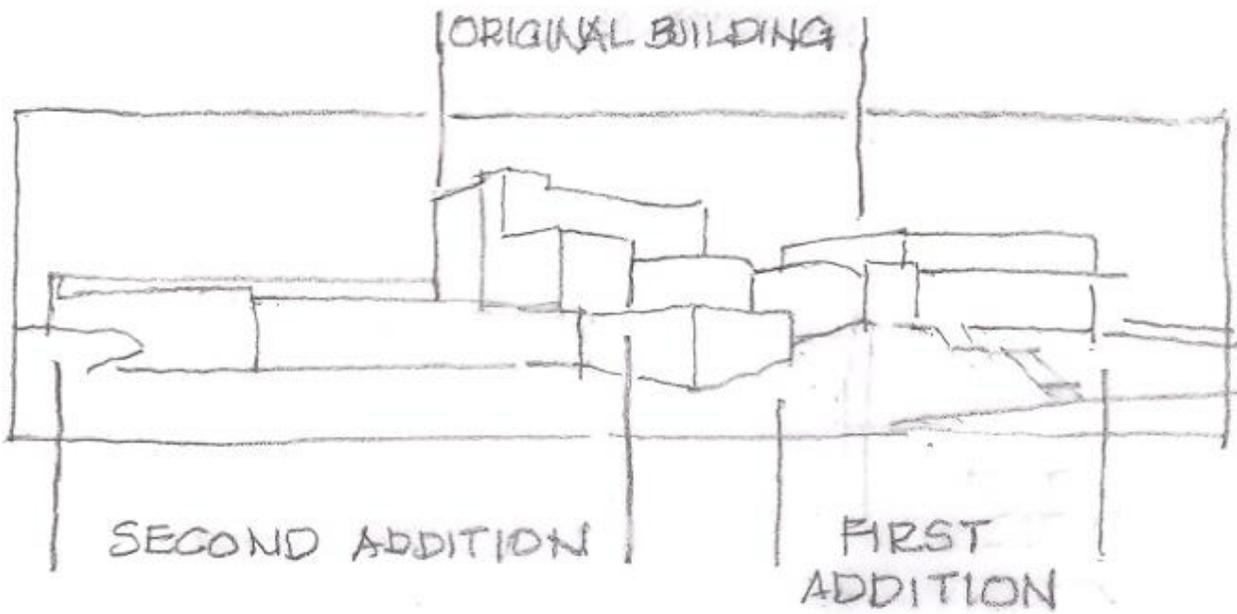
In closing, I wish to comment on some things that I did not include here. Although I have mentioned by name some of the members of the congregation who played major roles in the 1960s, I may have inadvertently not mentioned some that I should have. I apologize if such is the

case. I have not mentioned the names of people who gave me the benefit of their memories of these years; sensing that some might prefer that I did not.

I avoided an architectural evaluation of the building and of Tore Bjornstad's performance. Many longtime members of the congregation posed many interesting and perplexing questions came up on these topics. I thought their inclusion would have distracted from my present purpose. About Bjornstad, I will add that, after leaving Ames, he became founding director of the School of Architecture at Waterloo University in 1969-1972. He earned a Ph.D. in Building Engineering at Liverpool University, U.K., in 1974, and in 1977, after a long illness, died in Waterloo, Ontario, at the age of fifty-one.



1 Front (east side), March 2010.



2 Front, diagram.



3 Front, 1970.



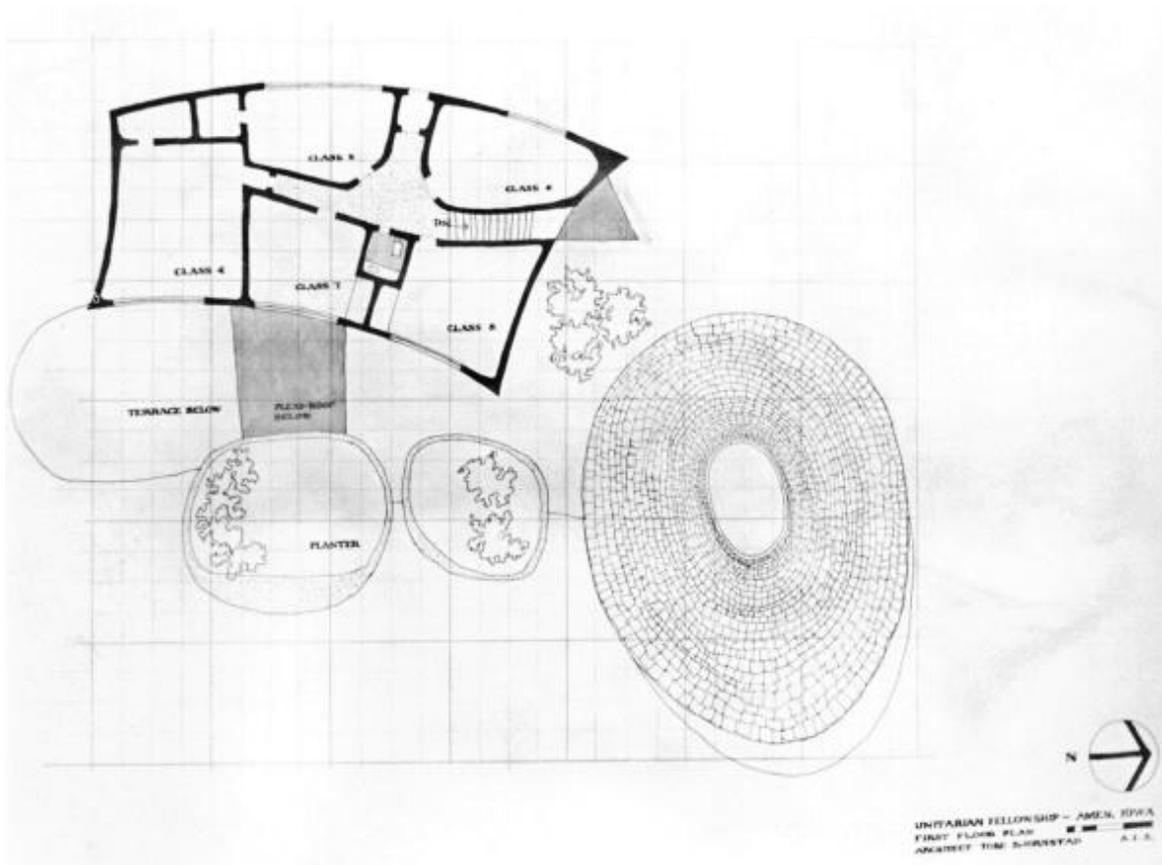
4 Front, painting, 1978. William Zimmerman.



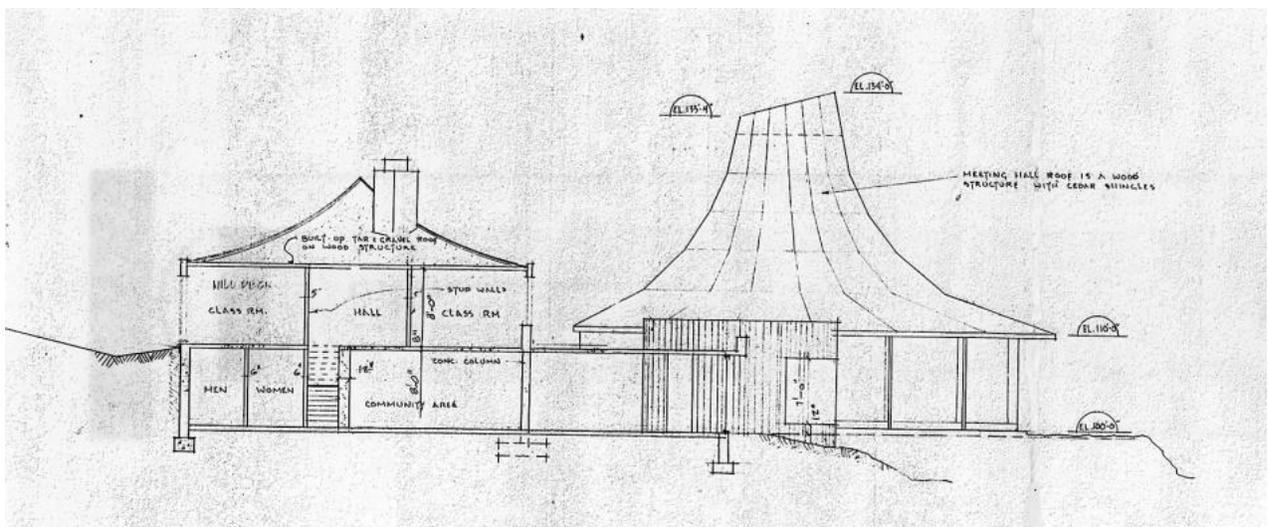
5 Tore Bjornstad..



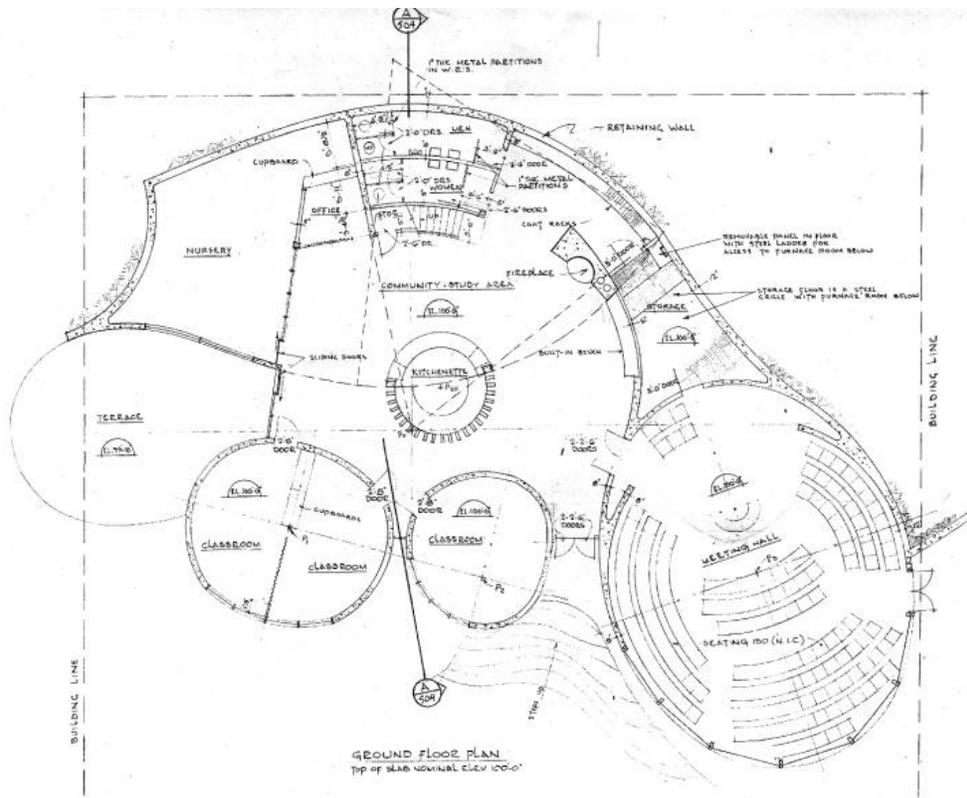
6 Model as seen from the east side, 1966.



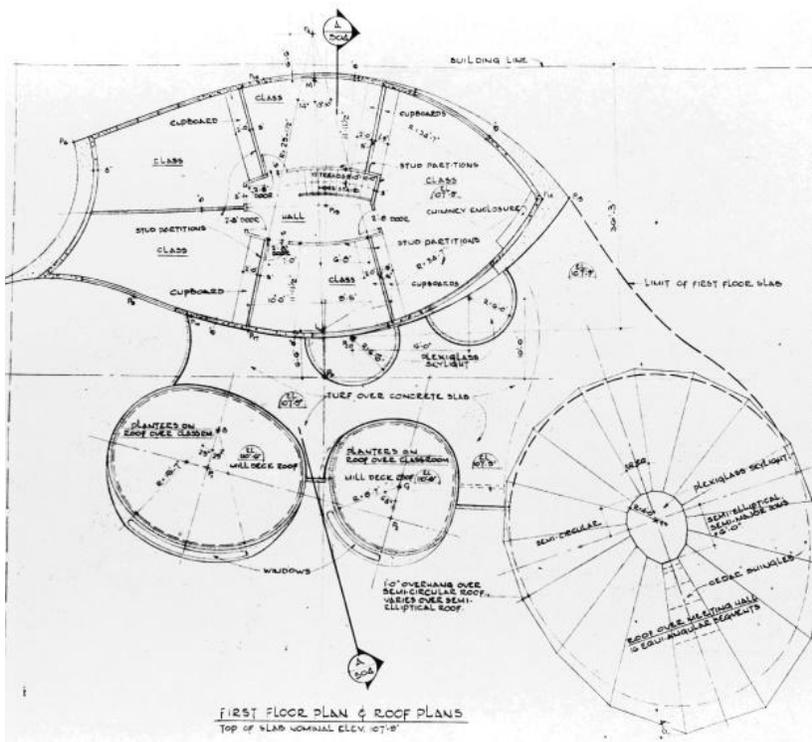
7 Floor plan, second floor and roofs of first floor, 1966.



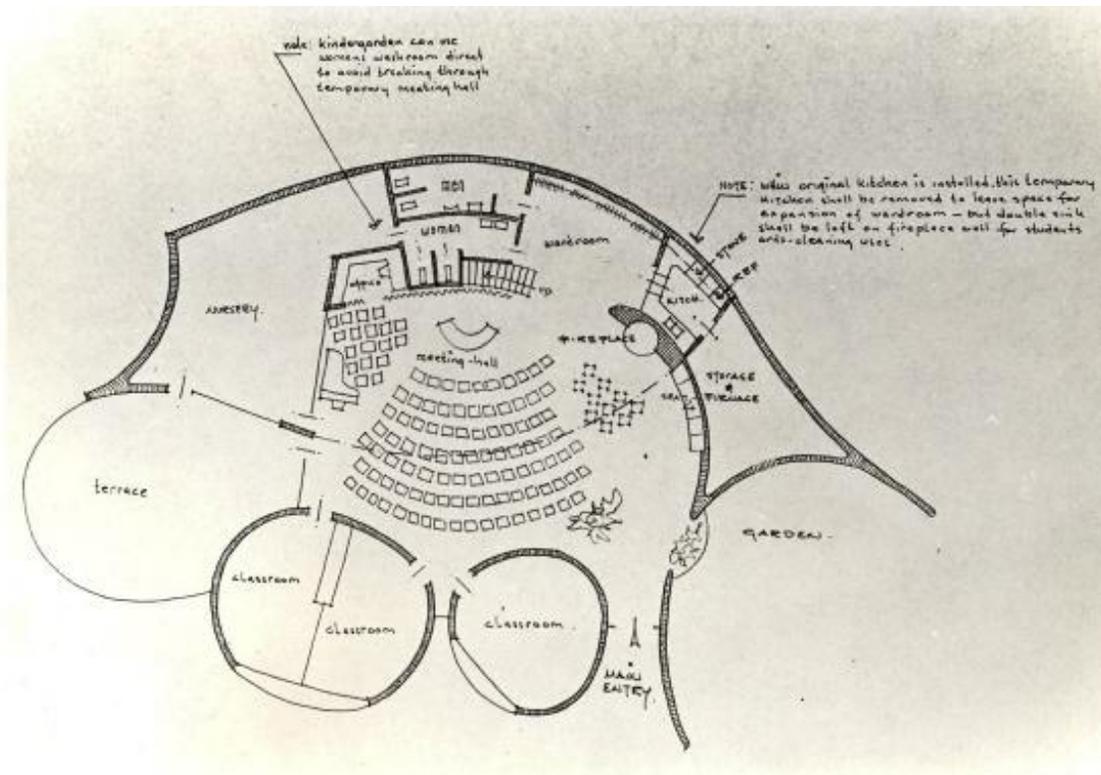
8 Cross section looking north, December 1967.



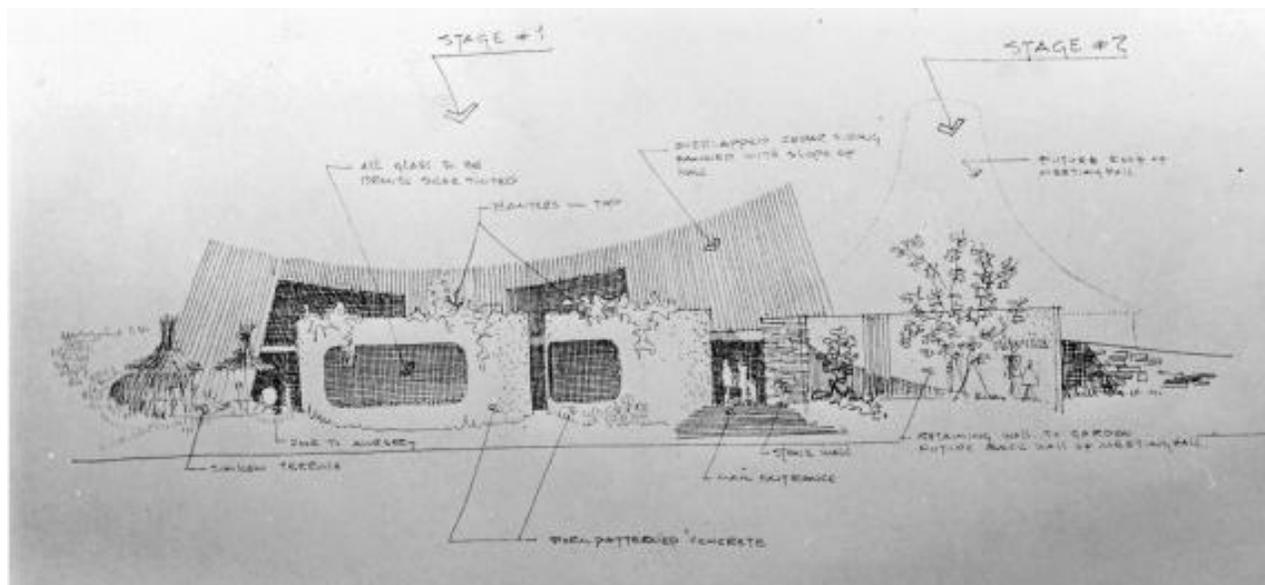
9 Plan, first floor, December 1967.



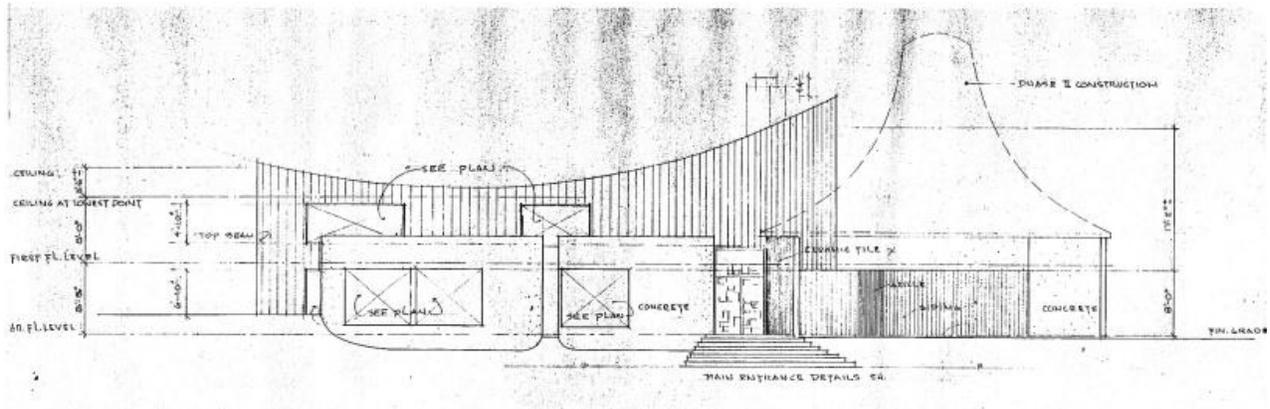
10 Plan, second floor, December 1967.



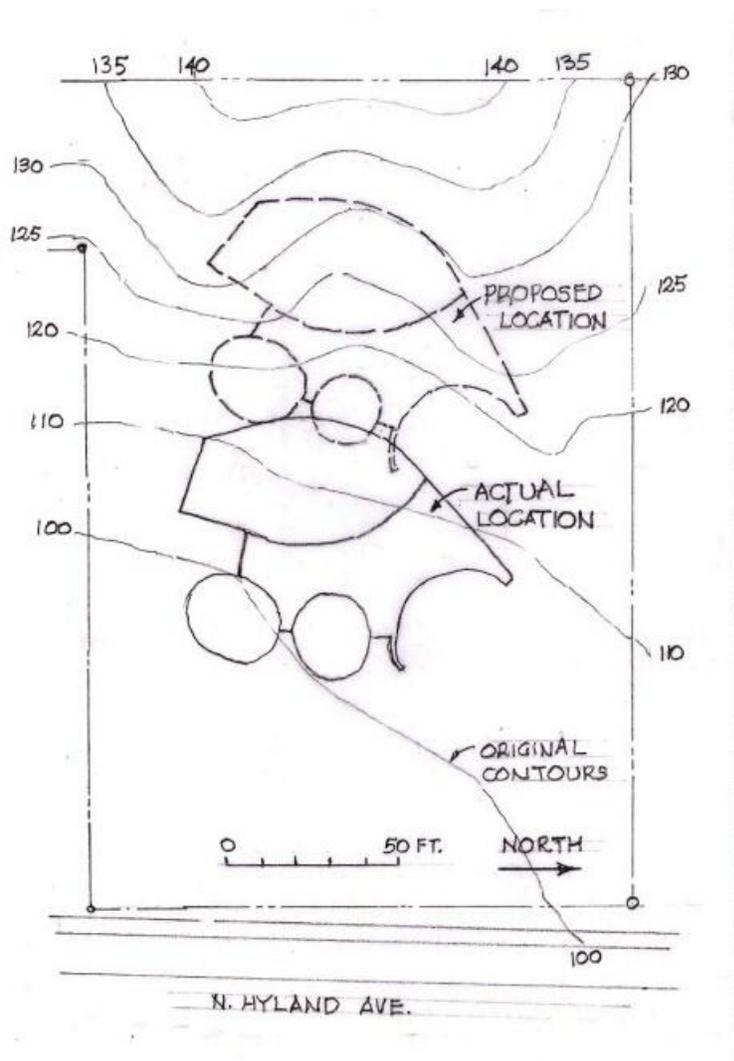
11 Plan, May 1968 approximately.



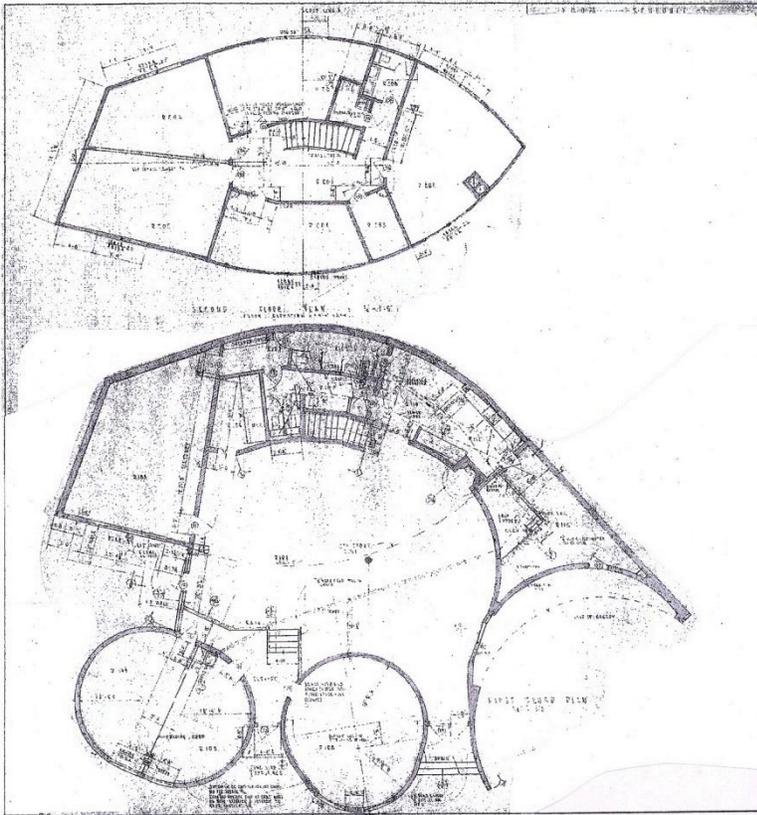
12 Elevation, May 1968 approximately.



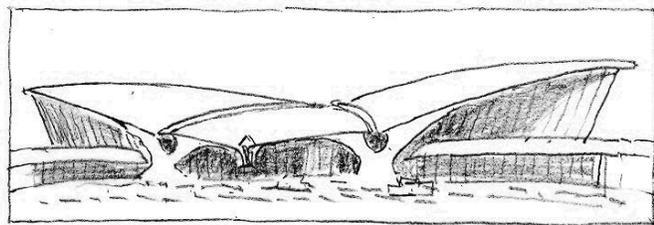
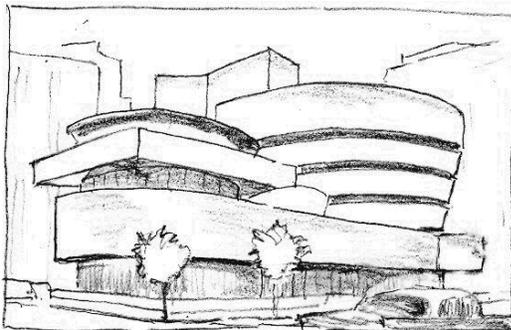
13 Elevation, September 1968.



14 Site plan diagram showing Bjornstad's proposed location of and actual location



15 Plans as built Fall, 1969. Lower plan is first floor. Upper plan is second floor.



16 New York. Guggenheim Museum, left, and TWA Terminal. They were completed in 1959 and 1962 and are the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Eero Saarinen, respectively.