

A Theology of Architecture

Sermon by the Rev. Jim Eller

**All Souls
Unitarian Universalist Church
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allsoulskc.org**

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Chalice Lighting, by Bruce Wiggins

Some of you know I have a degree in architecture. Some of you know I have been asked to chair the steering committee for our next capital campaign here at All Souls.

Architecture has both form and function. In both, it represents our values and also houses our aspirations.

I don't know how many of you think about this room as a great dynamic room, but it truly is, with its shape and rhythms. The dynamism can be seen to represent our differences, yet we gather together in this one place this morning in a common search, with common hopes.

Our hope for our church home is that it will provide quiet spaces for reflection and renewal; places of beauty where we can be inspired; places of study and learning where we are challenged and can learn' and places where we laugh and celebrate life.

Frank Lloyd Wright is probably the most famous American architect. And he was a Unitarian. He built two great Unitarian Universalist churches, one in Chicago (Oak Park, Il, actually), and in one Madison, WI. It's a moving experience to be in these buildings. I recommend you visit them if you can.

Wright said, "Form follows function - that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union."

I light the chalice for that spiritual union of form and function, mind and body, one and many – representing our highest values and aspirations.

Readings

The Architecture Says," by Rev. Alexie Crane

Why aren't churches built in the simple, inexpensive, utilitarian form in which supermarkets are constructed? Here you see expansive space at minimum cost. Flat roof, ceilings of modest height, neon lights, no spires or steeples, no stained glass, no ornamentation, no statuary.

You have no doubt noticed that architecture is not concerned only with providing sheltered floor space. It also makes a statement about how people regard the activities carried on within the structure.

The architecture of churches makes a statement that what happens in these buildings is of high importance to the people who inhabit them. It says that what happens within these walls has profound meaning, has dignity, solemnity, has significant consequences. The architecture says this building matters deeply to those who built it, and will matter as well to subsequent generations.

"Louis Kahn's First Unitarian Church," by Jean France

"Architecture is the thoughtful making of spaces," said architect Louis I. Kahn. "It is the creating of spaces that evoke a feeling of appropriate use."

Kahn was commissioned in 1959 to design a new building for the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York. The congregation had met for many years in a building of special architectural quality, designed in 1859 by Richard Upjohn, a leading 19th century architect and founder of the American

Institute of Architects. When that building had to be demolished for downtown redevelopment, the congregation felt a responsibility to replace it with one by a leading 20th century architect, giving the community a notable example of contemporary architecture.

A search committee interviewed a number of nationally known architects and recommended Kahn. Those who interviewed him felt that he was instinctively close to Unitarian Universalist ideas as well as an innovative architectural leader. His aesthetic philosophy was expressed in terms close to mysticism, words struggling to communicate a complex creative process. His intuitive architectural solutions began with a concern for the integrity of materials, a feeling for the expression of structure, and a desire to return to essentials, to express "only what matters."

In designing the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, Kahn began with a simple concept sketch. As he faced the initial congregational meeting, he drew on the blackboard, as he later explained, "my first reaction to what may be a direction in the building of a Unitarian Church. Having heard the minister give a sense of the Unitarian aspirations, it occurred to me that the sanctuary is merely the center of questions and that the school was that which raised the question and I felt that that which raised the question and that which was the sense of the question - the spirit of the question - were inseparable."

Kahn's concept sketch began with a question mark, chosen to represent the sanctuary, at the center of the building, surrounded by a circle to serve as an ambulatory representing the shades of belief possible in a Unitarian congregation. "I drew the ambulatory to respect the fact that what is being said or what is felt in the sanctuary was not necessarily something you have to participate in."

Next the sketch showed a corridor to serve the church and "the school which was really the walls of the entire area, so the school became the walls which surround the question."

"I felt that a direct, almost primitive statement was the way to begin, rather than a statement that already had many expressions of experience" and so he set down a drawing of what he felt "presented the inseparable parts of what you may call a Unitarian place."

From *The Timeless Way*, by Christopher Alexander

The more living patterns there are in a place – a room, a building, or a town – the more it comes to life as an entirety, the more it glows, the more it has that self maintaining fire which is the quality without a name. And when a building has this fire, then it becomes a part of nature. Like ocean waves, or blades of grass, its parts are governed by the endless play of repetition and variety in the presence of the fact that all things shall pass. This is the quality itself.

Sermon

"Beauty which translates joy into manifest forms was, for John Calvin, God's signature in creation," said Marilyn Robinson.

Let us start with a bit of philosophy and theology as we consider beauty in space, as we name what can be "holy ground." Certainly beauty and form manifest in place, time and structure points toward the creativity of Life and the best within humanity. For some this is a way of encountering the Holy, of knowing God.

Put another way, there is a difference between a really ugly building and a remarkably beautiful one. There is a difference between really bad art and inspiring art whose influence cascades meaning wonderfully down the ages.

The theologian, Paul Tillich, wrote about sacred art. He said that it could be understood in four ways. There is secular art that offers little and elicits none of the sacred. There is sacred art that is the same. It may be called sacred or have representations of the sacred, but it somehow does not communicate it. There can also be secular art that is so remarkable that it inspires to the point that we experience ourselves as encountering the holy, as having inspirational meaning made available. Finally and rarely, there is the special and unique art that is both sacred and transcendent. Most sacred art hopes for this quality, but few are able to embody it.

This same four-part scheme can be used for understanding art or architecture, or even philosophy and theology.

The same may be said of our philosophies and even theology. Sometimes poetry or personal musing can capture a sense of Ultimacy as much as long tracts of dogma. Paintings of sacred content are often not deeply inspiring. However, for me, Van Gogh's "Starry Night," which is secular in content, is luminous to the point of inspiration, and so is most of the work of Marc Chagall or El Greco. Buildings, too, are like this. The architecture of I. M. Pei's new wing of the National Gallery is wonderful, moving toward what can be experienced as sacred space. Notre Dame Cathedral with its giant rose window is both sacred content and sacred space for most who encounter it.

How do we know the Holy? What does beauty say to us about the nature of Life and meaning or about the nature of God?

Beautifully created space can ask and even answer all of these questions. There simply are places and spaces in which even the most devout secularist must stand in awe. The structure and space are so inviting the spirit is called to soar.

All structures offer meaning by their function. Architecture is art created from structure, form and function, and some architecture is sacred, but not all sacred architecture is beautiful, inspiring or transcendent.

Exodus says, "Come no closer! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy ground." Sacred space does not always require a building. The claiming, naming and intentions can create a place as sacred. Just taking off one's shoes can move us from normal space to a place invoking the Ultimate.

In 1980, four hundred of us gathered from across the continent; we came to re-envision our Unitarian Universalist youth movement, in a meeting we called Common Ground. We came with hope and vision. We came with concerns and openness. We had daily worship and it was often non-traditional. On third day, some of the staff and participants led the worship. We lined up to enter the building that had been prepared for worship. It was not a church. It was just a large meeting space at Carlton College in Northfield, Minnesota, but in worship it became sacred space. Candle light and chanting met you as you approached the room. In order to enter you were asked to repeat, "I enter in hope and love, ready to begin again." The worship team then responded "You are released to begin again in compassion and possibility."

The sense of entrance was so strong that most of us experienced ourselves as entering into sacred space and walking on holy ground. The worship was strong, the stories

deepening; our return to the work of the conference was transformed by our worship. It was not traditional architecture that made it worship, but the use of light and ritual and meaning. The sacred was in the experience, which illuminated the time and place. It was the sacred within the secular.

In contrast is this experience in what is alleged to be a sacred place, but it felt more like being a character in a bad Fellini movie. It was supposed to be one of the most sacred places. I visited Jerusalem in 1990. The city is truly a holy city, but the Tomb of the Holy Sepulcher was utterly bizarre. Here is the tomb in which myth and legend would have you believe Jesus was buried. I was invited to touch the Tomb, if I wanted, by a Coptic priest. Just come down into his small tent along the back edge of the tomb. In order to touch it, I had to get on my knees and bend forward, at which point I could see all of the money that had been collected. I was caught in a tourist trap in the midst of a huge religious circus. I paid, a bit. I touched the tomb. I felt nothing but ripped off in the name of Jesus. This was not holy: it was obscene. I left with this image and a host of other equally disturbing images.

The tradition of pilgrimaging to holy sites is deeply a part of the Christian tradition. Dating back to the 4th Century, pilgrims traveled to be near religious artifacts and sacred relics. These relics were believed to offer spiritual experiences just by the contact, and within time they came to be believed to sanctify and offer healing powers. The presence of these treasures did little to enhance the religious architecture, which tended to be simple Roman and usually in the form of a basilica, with a long central hall, known as nave. It was intended to represent a ship, and it is from this term that we get our word "Navy." In the altar of the great basilicas, like St. Peter's in Rome, there are usually two altars, one above ground and one directly below it. The one below contained the relics of long dead saints. For

many early Christians, the ancient bones and artifacts made their churches holy.

We do not have bones under the altar of our church. We do not worship the dead. Yet, I understand that the ashes of our former minister, Rev. Raymond Bragg, were buried just outside of the wall that is behind the altar area of this sanctuary. A sculpture of his head stands in memorial remembrance at the entrance of our worship space, called Bragg Auditorium. And yes, touching upon his remarkable intellectual and cultural achievements is to touch holy ground. So, this presence honors not only one of the great religious leaders but echoes the centuries old tradition of making a place holy by the presence of bones and artifacts.

The belief that artifacts confer power is far more superstitious than the beliefs of most Unitarian Universalists. A look at worship spaces may help us better understand how space does depict and shape our beliefs and our worship.

All structures offer meaning by their function. Architecture is art created from structure, form and function, and some architecture is sacred, but not all sacred architecture is beautiful, inspiring or transcendent.

Frank Lloyd Wright was a Unitarian. He was an occasionally active member of the Madison, Wisconsin, UU Church. He was also the architect who helped that congregation build their current building. It is a remarkably beautiful structure. It is designed to look like a sailing ship. The interior of the sanctuary faces forward toward the front of what would be the ship of their faith. It is as if the ship is in mid-wave adventuring forth into uncharted waters. The front of their worship room is the prow of the ship and it is also a stained glass window in the

prairie style. As you see through it to the awaiting future and outside world, you can't help but see it through a beautiful lens.

At the other end of the main room is the hearth room. Wright believed that the adventure of faith should be forward-looking and built upon the comfort of the familiar, the hearth of care and community. In order to enter the sanctuary you have to come through the entranceway, which has such a low ceiling that one is required to bow, unless you are shorter than five feet tall. You enter through the hearth room and there you sit in a testament to innovation and beauty. Pretty UU. Yes, it is an architectural treasure and the messages of the space are intentional and profound.

For UUs religion is an adventure. Faith is not the belief in things unproven, but is the realization that life works. We do not assume we have the answers to all things. Our churches are places of adventure, like in Madison. Places of open inquiry, like the Lou Kahn church in Rochester, New York, which is built in the shape of a question mark. Then there is our building. Our church was built by an architect who specialized in building middle schools, and our building does look remarkably like a school. This *does* match our way of faith. Every new discovery is another way of knowing Life more fully. Every new discovery in this way can be seen another opportunity for intimacy with life, for loving life more fully. To learn is to discover. To discover is a profound form of worship.

However, our sanctuary used to be more like a cafeteria than a room for worship. Our sanctuary had linoleum floors, concrete block walls and very uncomfortable chairs. It's hard to know what the message was. There was some disregard for creature comfort and aesthetic value, but that changed about ten years ago. Our building was remodeled. This room, our sanctuary,

was turned into an attractive space, one much more conducive to worship.

Maybe it reflected the shift from academic to a more holistic humanism. It made a huge difference in the vitality of this congregation. About five years ago, Rev. Chuck Gaines, a UU growth consultant, came to our district and congregation. He made many recommendations. He strongly suggested that we add an additional Sunday morning worship service, which we have done. He also suggested that a healthy congregation assesses the capital needs of the congregation about every eight to ten years. We have now arrived at that date.

We are in need of a new roof in the next three or four years. We need to replace the steps going down to Warwick Street and out toward the Art Institute. We will probably need to change the carpets, at least in the lobby. These are really capital maintenance needs, and the question we need to ask, is what else, if anything, should we do to enhance our building so it presents the future we hope for our congregation.

The last generation of this congregation, the one that existed ten years ago, imagined a vital worship congregation that both revered the past and had a place of great art and great worship. I am sure that many of the members of our church at that time made very real sacrifices to give us this gift of capacity and beauty that we now inhabit.

I wonder what gift this generation wants to give the next one?

When I look at our current building, I see that we do not have easy access downstairs. There is no way that a child, parent or teacher who is wheelchair-bound or handicapped can get there, at least not reasonably. The downstairs is so remote as to be rather invisible. Do we see our children as invisible? Is that

how they should be seen? Our current architecture offers that kind of image. We might consider adding handicap access and some kind of visual connection or access between the two. On an active night in our church, we run out of adult meeting space. We are a school for the spiritually and intellectually adventurous. Our strength at times exceeds our available space. This is a strength we can continue to maximize or we can retreat from our current growth. What we choose to do with our building will tell the story.

At times we fill our fellowship hall to capacity. This is great, but do we want to make room for more people to join us? Or do we really have all of the people we need or who might want to be UUs already?

What we do with our space is a statement about ourselves and about what we believe is important.

All structures offer meaning by their form and function. Architecture is art created from structure, form and function, and some architecture is sacred, and can be beautiful, inspiring and transcendent. What we do with our building is like a message in a bottle tossed upon the sea of time. What message do we as members of this congregation want to send to the future we are creating and only some of us will live to see?

The choice is ours, created by the legacy of the institution and facility we leave behind.