

THE ARCHITECT'S
EXPLANATION
OF THE BUILDING

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THE CONCEPT

This building is a serious attempt to express Unitarianism--a building truly symbolic of and designed for Unitarians. Yet it had to be built within all the difficult restrictions of a relatively small budget for the program requirements, a difficult site and the necessity to build in stages.

A few words are necessary on Unitarianism itself to explain the situation better. Beyond the abstraction "unity" for which Unitarians stand, the sense of oneness and 'including everybody in,' "Unitarians hold in unity of spirit a diversity of convictions." We are a group of free thinking people whose growth and maturity comes out of a participation in conversations and free exchange of thought--humanists and theists, rationalists and existentialists. Progress in thought comes from the interchange of points of view. This is one reason why the building opens completely through the middle. Unitarianism is never completed. The individual worshipper completes it for himself.

Unitarianism is not a mighty fortress built into the hill. It is a "blithe spirit" which takes you as you are and projects you into the world. The two sheltering halves of the building are whatever they mean to the beholder--a bird taking off, a ship taking sail, the wings of a bird protecting a beehive of activity underneath, "Angel Wings," two hands warming themselves over a flame, protecting hands gathering in--welcoming. The hands apart imply the Unitarians' attitude. When hands in prayer come together, it implies submission, support, finality, relaxation, an attitude of "I can't do this. God, do it for me." When separated, the hands are not the symbols of submission or abjectness, but vehicles for letting light and warmth through. They imply a new dimension for prayer, one of terrific concentration, pointing with a tension, still reaching, still moving, incomplete. You might almost say that Unitarians have agreed to be disunited. The separation itself, the split becomes the unifying force.

The two sheltering halves gather in the ridge which runs through the site--the only buildable area of consequence above the water table. There has always been to visitors a sense of progression on the site. One climbs the knoll on the south towards the two huge oak trees which dominate the ridge and are its climax overlooking the approach, Lyons Plain Road. The upward slope of the site helped in the development of the scheme. One has the feeling of progression, of going somewhere. This led to the concept of one roof shape that kept growing to the ultimate soaring expression--never closing--symbolic of the progress of life. From life to death perhaps all religious experience includes this feeling of continuity from the heritage from the past toward responsibility for posterity.

The entrance is at the south, and there is a sense of the progress of life to the ultimate height and then beyond. In plan, the building is low and intimate and welcomes in everyone as if with two out-stretched hands. As it narrows it gets higher. The plan has been studied carefully so all the rooms have the proper scale from the low, intimate classrooms to the south to the intimate social hall, and finally to the soaring sanctuary.

This feeling of dialogue is aided by the continuous skylight through the center of the building. Unitarians want to let the earth and stars in. They wish to feel the magnitude of the universe. Here, as the building separates to allow the hill to go through, we attain a sense of oneness with earth and sky.

From the exterior, the effect is mainly that of a simple fundamental shape with a timeless sense of beauty sheltering the hill, to be sheathed in copper, with the ridges running vertically to suggest uplift. The richness and the surprises occur mainly inside. Typically New England, it is simple, sparse and uncontrived; like the typical

New Englander who is reserved, slow to display his emotions, but warm inside. Like the old Quaker meeting houses, this building is simple, built of honest, durable materials and of good workmanship.

THE PLAN

The program requirements and the part of the site for building being what they are, necessitated a two-story scheme with the ground floor cut into the hill for intimacy and scale.

The younger children are on the ground floor with direct access to their classrooms and for noise separation from the older children's rooms. The inner foyer on the first floor opens into the social hall, and beyond is the sanctuary. This and the foyer can be used as an extension of the sanctuary for seating, or the chairs can be turned around, and the social hall becomes a stage for plays, lectures, concerts, etc. Indeed, the inner foyer beyond it, and the inner entry court can become extensions of the stage.

The ridge that runs through the building is indeed an integral part of the plan. The balconies on the sides offer a second means of egress for the classrooms and help the building to hover low over the ground. They offer a way to get to the rear of the sanctuary when it is used as an auditorium facing the social hall as stage.

The ground floor takes care of the younger children, the main toilet facilities, the equipment area, the offices and a Children's Chapel. There is multiple use of space whenever possible, and to emphasize the sense of "oneness" in the building. There is no real corridor. The social hall is entry into the sanctuary, the milling-about-place during coffee hour, and the dining place for dinners, meetings, etc. If there is a desire to keep the sanctuary inviolate, dining tables can spill over from the social hall into the inner foyer and beyond that into the loggias which are themselves

extensions of the classrooms, in order to make up larger areas when required, and to avoid long corridors which would be useless most of the time. The building and the planning are intended as an active "living" plan that allows participation and freedom of imagination and different uses by the congregation--a truly "living" church.

The building in its form is steeple, sanctuary, social hall, classrooms, all in one. Note how the north and south elevations make it look like a New England steeple. At night, lit from inside, the north elevation facing Lyons Plain Road will look like a "steeple of light." The sky is the steeple with a clear glass at the apex through which in darkness the North Star can be seen.

The effect of the eventual continuous stained glass skylight that breaks the building apart, will be like looking up through the branches of trees, perhaps in abstraction of the effect of colored leaves, tied in with the progression of life--the idea of childhood to death, spring, summer, fall, winter. This detail will be worked out with a double skylight, the visible lower one a tracery of different-sized gold aluminum members holding the small panes of glass (those echoing the New England small panes).

SITE USED

Relatively little of the site is actually buildable. We took a difficult situation and actually used it as the point of departure. The ridge that runs through the site is its distinguishing feature. Except for the corner of the site to the southeast, it is the only sizable part big enough to house all the program requirements. The approach road comes in so a view of the whole entity is had from a distance. When people get out of their cars at the south, they are invited into the entry court through low inviting eaves, and are drawn inward through higher narrower spaces to the climax beyond. And finally, under the oaks the ultimate plan calls for an outdoor, shrine-like area for depository of the ashes of the dead.

STRUCTURAL SYSTEM AND MATERIALS

The structure is something like the hull of a ship inside out--designing it was like lofting a boat--like ship hull construction which uses many light ribs with few heavy timbers, the main structural members are laminated wood arches placed 16 feet on center. Spanning these arches and serving in one operation as both the finished ceiling and decking surface for the ultimate copper roof is a 2 x 4 wood deck on edge, with finger scarfs to get lengths. The long dimension of each 2 x 4 is normal to each arch at points of support, so that in the length of the building each piece is twisted nearly 90°. These laminations are nailed on both sides to each preceding lamination and to the supports. Cost was the determining factor as well as design in the choice of this system.

The oldest church building in America in continuous use (since 1681) is the "Old Ship Church" in Hingham, Massachusetts, now a Unitarian church. Ours might well be called "The New Ship Church." Ground was broken on Labor Day 1960. The church was put in use the following summer. The sanctuary was completed and dedicated in 1964.

THE UNITARIAN CHURCH IN WESTPORT

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