

Architecture and Worship

**The Reverend Roger Fritts
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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, Maryland**

Part I

Two images of worship space that have developed in the world's religions. One is church as a symbol pointing to the sky home. Over the centuries many theologians have taught that the earth is only a temporary abode. Our true is in heaven. The church steeple, pointing toward heaven, is the most prominent feature of sky home worship.

When I drive onto the grounds of Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church, I get a different message. Our building, placed in the midst of a forest, suggests the symbol of the earth home.

The image of the earth home is fundamental to the Navaho and Hopi Indians of the Southwestern United States. The kiva is a model of the universe. It represents the attempt of the Native Americans to symbolically show their efforts to live in harmony with the earth.

In the same way, Unitarian Universalists are trying to develop an organic harmony with ourselves, our community and our natural environment. This building, with its lack of a steeple, and its position among the trees, suggests that this is a community of earth home worshipers. The earth home tradition emphasizes communal and expressive aspects of existence. Earth home traditions try to be in touch with cosmic harmonies, vibrations and emotional influences. I look out on the trees and I feel a sense of the sacredness of nature. Here we celebrate: The smell and feel of soil in our hands. The freshness of the wind against our skin. The warmth of the sun on our faces. The color of the leaves in the fall. And the sight of green buds announcing the coming of spring.

Part II

In 1955 Pietro Belluschi, one of the most famous architects in the United States, agreed to become the consulting architect for the design of this church.

Belluschi designed the church so that after parking our cars, we enter the building by walking along a sheltered walkway next to a secluded landscaped courtyard defined by a rustic wooden fence. Belluschi intend this walk to prepare us for the religious experience. Instead of having us enter the building abruptly from the parking lot, the courtyard gives us a transition space.

He designed this auditorium for us to use as an attractive worship space until this congregation could build a sanctuary. It included this stage because from its beginning our congregation has had a community theater group. Reflecting a Japanese influence in this Italian American's designs, a sojje screen hides the stage in the auditorium and forms a back drop to the pulpit.

Natural light was very important to Belluschi. He designed the auditorium and the proposed sanctuary pale with stained-glass window walls. Colors of rose, violet and amber glass were set in a pattern of rectangles, like the patterns found in a Japanese screen. Belluschi's glass walls open these rooms to the outside, imparting a sense of

connection between constructed and natural spaces.

The grooved wood on the walls on either side of the stage are intended to form a visually warm, textured surface. It also provides an acoustically absorbent surface to counter the hard reflective surfaces of the glass and the floor. Grooved wood was also used on the ceiling not only because it is pleasing to the eye, but also to absorb sound.

During his life Pietro Belluschi consulted in the design of more than 1,000 buildings. He was involved in the design of the World Bank Building, The Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore, and the master plan to rebuild the inner harbor in Baltimore. He was on the committee that selected the design for the Vietnam War Memorial and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial. In 1991 a National Medal for the Arts from the President of the United States. He died February 14, 1994 at the age of ninety-four.

Today we enjoy the space that he designed. A church placed in a forest of trees. A place we enter through a garden courtyard. A place of natural rock and wood, of soft light coming through pale amber, rose and violet glass. Our sacred space.

Part III

Over the years this room has been made sacred by Sunday Services, square dances, Thanksgiving dinners, Youth Group dinner productions, Alliance luncheons, memorial services, and weddings. With the windows on each side overlooking our grounds, this room is for many people a wonderful setting for a meaningful spiritual experience. The views out the windows are simple, dignified and calming, providing a natural setting for rest and reflection. One of the reasons we have not completed the third part of the original plan is because this room is a success.

Nevertheless, I feel that the original plan of the founders of this church to build an additional room for worship has merit. The 1950s plan was not designed to make this church larger in members but to provide an attractive worship space for the existing congregation.

Second, I also feel a reasonable alternative to building a new worship space would be to spruce up this space. For example, there is a lot of space behind this screen that is now used only for storage. I don't know anyone who believes that this is the best use of this space.

Third, it may be that the church of the twenty-first century will be a place where we can best serve Montgomery County by adding additional multi-purpose space to our facility. Perhaps we should think of this as a Unitarian Universalist Community Center, and we should look at the maintenance and improvements to our building with this in mind.

At the same time, I am a fiscal conservative and the leaders of this church are at least as conservative as I am when it comes to financial issues. I promise that we will not commit ourselves to any program that we cannot afford.

Still, in the same way that I get pleasure looking at a beautiful painting or a beautiful sculpture, or a beautiful photograph I enjoy looking at the designs created by the architects. Knowing that we are not going to harm what we love about this church the way it is now, and that we are not going to spend money we do not have, I hope you will relax and enjoy the creative and imaginative designs. I hope they will stimulate your imagination about the possibilities for the future.

Personally my goal is not to build more during my ministry with you. My goal is to encourage this congregation to be both financially responsible and to be open to new ideas as we look toward the future of this church. This

church will be here a long time, very likely it will be here in 100 years. I discourage you from sticking in your heels and saying it should always be the way it is right now. I encourage you to be open to new possibilities in the future.