How many of you have been to visit a cathedral, either in Europe or here in the US at say, the National Cathedral in Washington?

Today we'll be talking about the theology of architecture, and I think when most people think about church architecture, it is these grand cathedrals that often come to mind. And that's appropriate when we start to talk not only about the buildings themselves, which is an interesting topic in and of itself, but about the theology that lies behind the architecture.

What I mean when I say “the theology behind the architecture” is this: What is the designer of the church or temple trying to tell us about God, or about ultimate reality through the design of the building? What can we learn about a religion by looking at the building in which that religion is practiced? What are we telling the world with the buildings that we build for our religion, for Unitarian Universalism? And, most importantly, how can we ensure that our buildings send an appropriate message about what's important to our faith?

Sending a message about the religion through the building has a long standing tradition, going back to those cathedrals. I am not an expert on cathedral architecture by any stretch, but I’ve learned that those cathedrals that one probably thinks of as most typical are built in the gothic style, and the gothic style of architecture is a feat of engineering that allowed a building for the first time to become very, very large.

Through the use of flying buttresses there on the sides holding them up and so on, suddenly people could take a monumental amount of stone and raise it so high above the ground that it would take your breath away. Especially if you happened to have been drawing breath during medieval times in Europe, in 11 or 1200 CE.

The first cathedrals of medieval times were so large, so out of scale with the communities and other buildings around them that it was incredible, literally stunning. Cathedrals are the original McMansions on a much larger scale, taking a regular piece of property with modest houses all around and building something completely out of whack, completely disproportionate to the
buildings next door.

And that is the first theological point of a cathedral. The first theological point of a cathedral is that God, and therefore God’s building, God’s house, is way, way bigger than anything you’ve ever seen before. Imagine the average medievalist, around the year 1200, who begins to sense the scale of the cathedral the Church is building in town, begins to learn of the height the builders can now achieve even though nothing like that has been done before. It would seem like a miracle, and that is no mistake. A religion like Catholicism that talks about miracles would want a building that seems like a miracle too, something nearly unbelievable, something far out of the reach of the everyday. A first theological point, made from the outset by the very size of the building created.

But cathedrals did not stop there in their messaging. The shape of a cathedral is no accident either, often being in the shape of an enormous cross if viewed from the sky – which is, as taught, where God is looking from, right? A big God looking for big proof of devotion would be interested in seeing an outlandishly large cross laid out across your town.

Inside the cathedral is more messaging. Most cathedrals were designed with spaces that progressed from public to private, modeled after the great temple of Jerusalem that once housed the Holy of Holies, the Tabernacle that was brought down the mountain by Moses. In cathedrals, like in the Jerusalem temple, there is by design a large place for the public, for more everyday activities. Then as you progress through the cathedral towards the opposite end there are places for different activities with different levels of sanctity.

The holiest objects or people were the pope and the Eucharist, so those things or people were stationed at the farthest remove, with barriers at different points to keep the average person away. Then, less privately, you have an area for the altar table where priests celebrate mass and consecrate the bread and wine, then farther out there is an area for the choir and the pulpit for readings and sermons, and then you get to the average person’s space where worshippers gather and so on.

The design of the entire place reinforced the theology that was taught there. The design of the building placed the objects of greatest value at greatest height and at greatest remove. The design itself tells the story of what matters most and what matters less, what is common and what is sacred. The theology of the architecture of cathedrals is literally set in stone.

Fast forward several hundred years and you have a different sort of theology being preached by an entirely different form of architecture. Our Unitarian Universalist foreparents were pilgrims, who took the lessons of the Protestant Reformation very seriously in their teaching and in their buildings. Gone was the desire for an impossibly huge building built with money demanded by a powerful, privileged priestly class from poor people who were pressed into the religion whether they knew much about it or not. Gone was the ornate, storytelling stained glass and the commissioned art. Gone was the centrally located altar table behind the rail and stairs, where only priests could go to turn the bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Christ.

The Protestant Reformation led to a re-creation of Christianity that centralized the notion that God’s
Word, as revealed in the Bible, was key to all religious understanding - not the say-so of priests or the teaching of Rome. The ideal believer, in this view, was any common person who studied the bible in its original form and developed an understanding of it. The Reformation was the original back-to-basics movement, where church ornamentation was now suspect because it came from corrupt money-making practices of the church and also because, well, stained glass just isn’t biblical. The sacramental role of priests in transforming the bread and wine was downplayed; education, and erudition, were encouraged. The idea of the priesthood of all believers emerged.

Knowing this, it’s no surprise to see the spare meetinghouses and churches of our pilgrim ancestors here in this country. If you’ve been up to New England you can see the originals, although it’s easy enough to visit the same sort of architecture around the country. A white steepled church, located on the town square, still spoke to the centrality of the church within the community. The Congregational church in Massachusetts was even more central because of the way in which the town and congregation were enmeshed with each other, and decisions in both were made by the membership as a whole, not by a privileged few – at least initially.

Inside, these churches were spare to the extreme. The central focus in all of them is the pulpit, the center of the Word, and in some of them that pulpit is raised high above the pews, looking almost like an egg-shaped pod in the air, with multiple stairs leading up to the landing deck. This central location of the preacher’s platform sent the precise message that these Protestants wanted to send – what matters most, the thing of most value, is the word of God and our understanding of that Word. And that is what these early Americans did in worship. They spent many an hour listening to a preacher interpret Scripture, often literally from on high.

These were our American Unitarian and Universalist ancestors, these pilgrims, and our UU reverence for the spoken word, for an idea thoroughly examined in a worship space, has not changed, even though the subject of the examination usually has. But there have been other influences on Unitarian Universalism that have led to changes in our architecture, commonalities that you’ll see among UU congregations built over the past 60 years or so.

The first influence was the humanist movement of the ‘30s and ‘40s, although you could also think of it as a rationalist movement or a populist movement. I’m not sure exactly how to tease it apart. But the history went like this: as Unitarians began to introduce more and more of what they called “reason” into religious faith, they became less and less interested in having certain worship spaces deemed more “holy” than others.

These Unitarian thinkers created a kind of dichotomy, where their side was interested in religious ideas that incorporated reason and science, and they were not interested in religious ideas that included what they would call “supernatural” influences, or “irrational” thinking, which might include belief in a personal God who has a hand in human affairs, or a belief in the miracles of the Bible rather than the ethical teachings of the Bible, and stuff like that.

I’m trying to tread a cautious ground here in my description, because I am very aware of and grateful for the ongoing attachment to the use of reason in our religion. I am also someone who believes that there a lot going on in the world that human beings will never comprehend through their reason or through the use of the scientific process. In the historical line of thinking I’m describing, things that you could see or experience or understand in this world were real, and
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deserving of religious recognition. Things you couldn’t see or that some religion tried to make you believe or that were outside of the common experience were not real, were maybe some religion trying to trick you, and this generation of Unitarian didn’t want any part of that.

The direct result of this as far as architecture was concerned was that there was far less space in a given church devoted to anything “holy,” and quite a bit of extra space devoted to natural things of worth, like nature itself, or community and fellowship.

Later in the century the baby boomer generation added to the conversation with the notion that all people are equally on a religious journey, everyone has flaws and gifts the same as any other, so there is no real difference between the space that a minister might regularly occupy in church, and the space that the laity occupies in church. All are equal, all have their own value, everyone is important.

And so we see the vast majority of Unitarian Universalist architecture in this Washington DC area, almost entirely built in the 1950s and 60s, incorporating all these new ideas. Churches were built in the woods, keeping their spare historical interiors, but adding many windows that showed trees and sky outside. There was no longer an “altar” space or a divide, even in spirit, between the front of the worship space where the ministers spoke, and the rest of the room. Circular buildings, many like this one, fell into favor, and those buildings continued to help us UUs understand that we weren’t there to worship one particular person, but we were gathered as a community to make a journey together, and all of us matter.

In fact, the very term ‘worship’ fell out of favor, replaced by ‘Sunday service’. And in our architectural designs, ‘Sanctuary’ became ‘Fellowship Hall,’ if you were lucky, or ‘Auditorium,’ if you were not, and this change was not just in name but also in practice, because what became most important to UUs was the community who met there. Rather than building dedicated worship spaces for Sunday mornings, UU congregations of the day built multi-purpose rooms to be used in all sorts of times and occasions.

It’s important to note that this didn’t happen by accident, as if using a worship space for your potluck dinner was just a convenience. It happened on purpose, because UUs of the middle of the 20th century came to value equality among people and equal access to the holy. They promoted the notion that whatever sacredness there was in the world was present whether you were gathered for a Sunday morning service or if you were gathered for a potluck dinner, so why not hold those events in the same place?

I once overheard a conversation held between two UUs at the congregation at River Road when I was an intern there, after the worship service when rampaging children were chasing each other across the pulpit area. One person was sighing, saying she wished the kids had more respect for the worship space, and the other one, somewhat older, said how the sight of children playing up where worship was led always made her happy, because it meant everyone was welcome everywhere in the building. To her, those children playing was a concrete example that everyone was welcome everywhere in our religion, all the time, no matter what. There weren’t rules and a hierarchy and bossy insiders who told you your place in our church. We were free here, even the kids, even where the holy of holies would be in another faith. That was significant for her. And she was right to pick up the religious meaning behind the design of the space the way that she did,
because that was the meaning that the design of that building intended to impart.

The way we construct our religious buildings is important. It tells people who we are and what we believe.

Our Unitarian Universalist pendulum has swung back in the most recent decades, towards a greater comfort with religious language and religious rooms, including ‘worship’ and ‘sanctuary’. While we may stop short of declaring the religious objects up here like our chalice to be sacred, we tend to handle them with respect rather than with an everyday casualness. While we ourselves use this room for a number of purposes, it serves as a meaningful worship space for us on Sunday mornings, and we don’t tend to run through it like a herd of cattle no matter what we do.

We are in an interesting church here at Sugarloaf because we are one of the newest churches built in our area, located here only since 2007, and we’re one of the youngest congregations in our area as well, being just 15 years old. It is possible that our Sugarloaf architecture represents a new generation of being Unitarian Universalist, if we’ll look around to notice the choices that were made, are being made.

We are the beneficiaries of so many religious influences, and you can see them all around us. We have white walls and little decoration on them, just like our pilgrim ancestors. We have lots of windows so you don’t have to just look at your preacher during worship, you can also take in the glory of creation. Our naturalist foreparents would appreciate that.

This congregation is located in a rural setting, just like so many others around the Beltway who settled in the 1950s. But I happen to believe that this spot was chosen not because of a desire to get away from the ‘holy supernatural’ and move to more “rational,” natural spot, but because the people who chose this space wanted to honor the holy that abounds within the natural. Many of us believe that this whole piece of property deserves the term ‘sanctuary’ – and we don’t mind using that word when it is appropriate.

And then there’s the yurt. Such an unusual building tells a story, for sure – what part of its story is about our religion, our theology, our faith? Was it merely a reasonably-priced solution to an aspirational church’s problem? Or is there something in this roundness that tells people who we are and why we are needed? What about this space is like the cathedral, with its disproportionate size and its symbol that can be seen from heaven? What is the message that this yurt sends to the world?

Give it some thought. Someday, we here at Sugarloaf will make new choices about buildings. We’ll make them because we’re practical and because we’re efficient, that is likely. But let us also make them because we are a people of faith, a people with a message to send, a people who use our very buildings to remind ourselves and the world what we are about and what we want to do.

May all your buildings be holy ones. Amen.
The Theology of Architecture

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