

Questioning Creativity: Evidence from the 1950s

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Introduction

The nature of creativity as both a process and an individual attribute first attracted wide interest in the 1950s. Among architects, the importance of creative thinking in the face of new tasks and expanding opportunities was evident in books, journal articles, and conferences. Pinning down the source of creative thinking was also a renewed interest among philosophers, artists, and social scientists. There was a strong current of practicality behind the early research, an attempt to recognize and nurture creative individuals so that the potential for innovation and invention of American society as a whole could be put to use. After the 50s and 60s, research in the social sciences sought to understand the complex phenomenon of creativity more broadly as central to the human condition, and the role of creative arts in social constructions of meaning. By the later 1990s, studies of creativity were adapting the research methods of cognitive psychology ever more rigorously. Theoretical and experimental investigations of creative cognition were joined and began to include advancements in neuroscience.¹ This paper will compare the results of a study of creativity in architects from the earliest phase of this research arc with evidence from some of the architects' projects for communities that explicitly desired architectural innovation. The aim is to expand on the early research findings with contemporaneous evidence, and to assess both narratives with the implications of subsequent research on creativity from cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

The Creative Architect

In the 1950's, the leading psychological research on creativity was taking place at Berkeley under the direction of Donald MacKinnon. The prevailing wisdom was that creativity was a part of an individual's personality, and so research efforts focused on finding its correspondence with particular traits and behaviors, and perhaps to even identify predictors. In 1958-59, he gathered an all-star group of forty of the most prominent architects to undergo 3-4 days of testing and interviews at his Berkeley lab. Given the size of the group and its variety, it is somewhat of a let-down for us now to read his final conclusions: he found the driving factor was a will to succeed along with a belief in their own ability—a self-confidence that was manifested in their refusal to conform in thought or behavior. In one sense, they were creative because they believed that they were creative—and correct. All of the analysis, all of the parsing of various abilities, wound up with the same mythic artist-hero of an architect that had appeared in a now-notorious film ten years before.

The Innovation-seeking Client

Among the architects selected for MacKinnon's study were quite a few that had commissions in the 50s and 60s for Unitarian churches, many of which continue to be regarded as innovative designs.² The post-war decades saw a boom in church building across religions and denominations, but American Unitarian congregations were uniquely committed to modernism. Modern architecture was embraced as physical manifestation of their particular progressive outlook and sense of spirituality. That widely held view was eventually reflected in a surprising

¹ R. E. Jung and O. Varanian, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of the Neuroscience of Creativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2.

² At least eleven of the 64 architects invited to participate designed Unitarian churches between 1949 and 1972, mostly between 1955 and 1965.

number of church designs that were uniformly modern and yet all distinctly different. Such a variety can be attributed in large part to the convergence of two socio-cultural factors: architecture's search for new ways of being modern at mid-century, and Unitarianism's search for self-definition and identity at a time of both anxiety and growth.

Identity and Self-Expression

Mid-century architects were embracing modernism to the fullest, but were at the same time re-defining some of its fundamental assumptions and values. As influences from history and precedent entered the discourse along with a wider palette of materials and intentions, each individual architect defined their own design process, philosophy, and way of being modern. In fact, success at the highest level of the profession seemed to depend on establishing a unique creative approach, one that for some of the architects implied a search for the essence of architecture itself. These architects encountered in Unitarian clients communities that were equally immersed in soul-searching. Twentieth-century Unitarianism was never easily or clearly defined—there was no denomination-wide belief requirement, creed, or liturgy. These are the common elements of a religion that most often provide a basis for a church's design expression . Yet each congregation was a community with important shared values, and they wanted a church design that reflected them. They generally wanted a modern church design that would be a cultural contribution to their broader community; one that expressed reason, clarity, and individuality. In essence, they wanted a communal architectural self-portrait.

The relationship between each congregation and their chosen architect was not uniform, but in several well-documented cases, the design process was what would now be described as participatory. A congregation-wide conversation on values would be carried into programming and architect selection by committees. Design progress required a series of committee approvals, and ultimately the whole congregation voted on the final design. This does not sound like the kind of process that MacKinnon's creative architect would allow, much less embrace. But as much as Unitarians believed in inclusivity and democratic processes for the community, they valued individual freedom. The human capacity for reason, progress, invention, and creativity was seen by them either as a spark of divinity itself, or else that part of our world worthy of celebration and optimism. The congregation insisted on being heard, and being intellectually engaged with their architect. But—crucially—at the same time, they respected the architect as the one giving form to their shared vision. The architects for their part had clients that desired innovation and granted them the freedom to explore.

This paper will present brief case studies to illustrate some of the ways that the Unitarian church projects responded to particulars of congregational needs and values while architects exercised their creativity with results that were of their highest quality. It will discuss the relationship between MacKinnon's work and the case studies, and will further reflect on more recent creativity research and how it may broaden our understanding of a moment of architectural renaissance.

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