The Continuity of Democracy as a Spiritual Tradition

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First Church was the covenant of the community of religious dissenters led by John Winthrop from Boston, Lincolnshire that settled on the Shawmut Peninsula in 1630.[1] They built their first meetinghouse in 1632 on a site that became State Street. The congregation moved to a second structure on Cornhill (later Washington Street) in 1639. When it burned down in 1711, they replaced it with a third, larger meetinghouse of brick that was used for nearly 100 years. A fourth building was constructed on Chauncy Street in 1807 because the Washington Street location had become a busy commercial area. Sixty years later the congregation decided to further escape downtown congestion; they built their fifth home in the newly reclaimed area of Back Bay. This was an up-to-date Gothic revival church whose tower still stands at the corner of Marlborough and Berkeley Streets. Along Berkeley Street, there is an arcaded porch with a rose window above. On the Marlborough Street side, however, a modern concrete and glass structure is tucked behind the tower. The Gothic revival building was 100 years old when it was destroyed by fire in 1969 and the congregation chose Paul Rudolph to design its replacement. Its concave geometry surrounds a small sunken court, providing a moment of urban repose in the busy Back Bay. These disparate elements, the Gothic façade and the modern structure behind it, are still the home of First Church, Boston. The sequence of these buildings tells a story of one congregation that is also true of their denomination, currently known as Unitarian Universalist: while embracing progressive change in theology, worship, and architecture, the *community* has maintained continuity for over three centuries. The historical arc of this congregation is a microcosm of the Unitarian denomination: though theology has changed, the core values of individual freedom and democracy continue to be the animating spirit defining the community.

Democracy: practice and value in Unitarianism

The use of democratic processes in self-governance are a legacy since Puritan times. From the 1600s onward, each congregation called and elected its own minister. They could also vote him out. The democratically-led faith has de-emphasized any special authority or power being delegated to the ministry."[2] Instead, the congregation is held together by a covenant, signed by each member, that is a voluntary agreement to live together in community. This strongly anti-authoritarian nature made national organization and recognition of the denomination a difficult enterprise.

A rift in Congregational theology between liberal and conservative perspectives developed through the second half of the 18th century, and was amplified by the American Revolution. The extended break-up into two different denominations in the early 1800s was a result of individual congregational votes. The liberals were heavily influenced by Enlightenment philosophies and the social visions of the new republic. The first defining statement of the liberal faction that resonated widely and that stood the test of time was an 1819 sermon by William Ellery Channing. Channing's sermon affirmed the dignity of man over the conservative belief in the depravity of man. He asserted the unity of God and the moral nature of human conscience, thereby

[1] "The Story of First Church Boston," http://www.firstchurchbostonhistory.org/

[2] Andrea Greenwood and Mark W. Harris, *An Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 140.

substituting “humane values for the traditional acknowledgement of God’s sovereign will.”[3] And he believed the direction of Unitarianism to be the merger of Christianity and democracy.

By the end of the 19th century, Unitarian belief in a Christian God was no longer institutional, but the Enlightenment values of freedom and democracy remained intact. Ministers such as James Freeman Clarke[4] and William Channing Gannett[5] extended their theological tenets to include acknowledgement of the brotherhood of man, individual conscience as the sole authority in terms of religious belief, and a duty to the common good. While religious beliefs were left to the individual, there was a strong emphasis on the value of community. Fifty years later, A. Powell Davies offered his own “Working Principles” of Unitarianism, the third of which was “the democratic process in human relations.”[6]

Democracy in architecture

The early expression of America’s democratic ideals in architecture were in formal allusions to Athens and Republican Rome. But visionaries such as Emerson and Greenough made calls early on for art forms that were distinctly American. It was not until the second half of the 19th century that original architectural designs emerged in the work of Frank Furness, H. H. Richardson, and Louis Sullivan. Among them, only Sullivan wrote about American originality. He advocated for ‘democratic form’ in architecture by which he meant “an organically unfolding process and an object of symbolic representation that emerges from the collective imagination of a modern, progressive society and it is an act of individual poetic genius.”[7] This definition places the architect/artist in the position of interpreting a collective will, and then translating that interpretation into symbolic form. A system of thinking (the pragmatic) must be followed by ‘expression’ in order to come to life. The expression brings the idea beauty and emotional bearing. For him, democratic architecture had to start with pragmatic realities of the time and the cultural direction, but could never stop there. It had to speak to humanity with emotion and beauty as well.[8]

Frank Lloyd Wright acknowledged Sullivan as “my old Master” in the first and third paragraphs of a lecture series published as “An Organic Architecture: The Architecture of Democracy.”[9] But he was also steeped in Emersonian Unitarian ideas as a child and young adult. He promoted “organic” architecture as modern, a necessary alternative to traditional building styles. His Prairie Style buildings that inhere the horizontal expanse of the Midwest landscape—anchored in site but spatially extended—clearly exemplify his sense of a democratic design. The common theme with Sullivan was the belief in nature as the source of order.

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[3] Stow Persons, *American Minds, A History of Ideas* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), 181.

[4] David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 105: Clarke’s “Five Points of the New Theology,” 1886: the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development (progress of mankind.)

[5] Andrea Greenwood and Mark W. Harris, *An Introduction to the Unitarian and Universalist Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 92: Gannett’s “Things Commonly Believed,” 1887: Freedom, the method of religion in place of authority; Fellowship, the spirit of religion in place of sectarianism; Character, the test in religion in place of ritual or creed; Service, or salvation of others, the aim of religion, in place of salvation of self.

[6] Robinson, *Unitarians and Universalists*, 167.

[7] Lauren S. Weingarden, *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 32.

[8] Louis H. Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings* (New York: Dover, 1979), 191-94.

[9] Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Organic Architecture: The Architecture of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1970), 1.

Sullivan's views were also admired and strongly endorsed by Wright's contemporary, Claude Bragdon: "We have always been very glib about democracy; we have assumed that this country was a democracy because we named it so… In the life of Abraham Lincoln, in the poetry of Walt Whitman, in the architecture of Louis Sullivan, the spirit of democracy found utterance, and to the extent that we ourselves partake of that spirit, it will find utterance also in us."[10] Bragdon expressed 'the spirit of democracy' in proportional and geometric ordering systems in his architecture. However, he was so intrigued by the social dimensions of architecture that he eventually stopped designing buildings in favor of making festival spaces—ephemeral, transitory, open to all.

More recently, philosopher J. C. Berendzen has pursued the idea of space designed for democracy using Hegel's discussion of architecture in *Aesthetics* and Habermas's theory of democracy.[11] In a study of three public buildings, Berendzen determines that all have a "complex, internally differentiated structure that seems to move beyond the constraints put on architecture by gravity;" he proposes that the complex designs motivate those who use the building to engage in a collective form of reflection—to reflect on their place in the civil community served by the building. To generalize from the complexity and gravity defiance of contemporary forms, one might suppose that any factor out of the norm of architectural expectations might serve to open a reflective state of mind in which awareness of the collective and its democratic interactions emerges.

Unitarian churches: democratic architecture

When American religions embarked on a church-building boom after World War II, Unitarian congregations adopted modern architecture almost universally. They saw modern architecture as inherently suited to express the character of their philosophies. Mid-century Unitarian churches are generally innovative and distinctive, a result of each congregation asking its architect for a unique expression of their humanistic world view. Frank Lloyd Wright's design for the Madison, WI congregation and Louis I. Kahn's design for First Unitarian in Rochester, NY are only the most well-known of dozens that were built.

The Unitarian values of individual freedom and democracy were central to the charges that the congregations gave their architects, and evident in the ways that they viewed and valued the churches that they built. For example, the minister of the Schenectady, NY congregation recalled in his dedication service that they had begun the process with a desire that their building "would symbolize a free religion nurtured in human fellowship, speak of the democratic process and its respect for the individual, and challenge us never to falter in our search for the good, the true, and the beautiful,"[12] For Unitarian churches, the very principles of the architectural language expressed their beliefs: non-hierarchical and asymmetrical tendencies in composition; dominance of the horizontal over the vertical; clarity and truth through exposed structure and simple materials; ambiguity of closure; connections between interior and exterior spaces; and abundant natural light. Though no two churches look alike, the churches of the 50s and 60s were generally optimistic and aspirational expressions of core American values and ideals.

Two patterns emerge from various accounts of the design and construction of these Unitarian churches. One is of congregational involvement in both visioning and decision-making using democratic processes, and the other is that of architects producing works that are not only regarded as creative or innovative, but that also often prove to be significant in their own artistic

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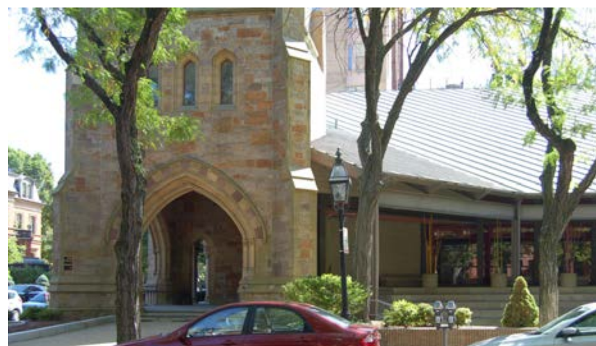
[10] Claude Bragdon, *Architecture and Democracy* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1926), 145.
[11] J. C. Berendzen, "Institutional Design and Public Space: Hegel, Architecture, and Democracy," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 291-307.
[12] "Our Building at 1221 Wendell Ave," pamphlet, nd.

and intellectual trajectories. This echoes Sullivan's ideas of democratic form: it involves a process of collective imagination on the one hand, and design of an object/form by individual poetic genius. Every member of the congregation gets a voice in the formation of a collective vision, but they also trust and respect the architect as a creator.

University Unitarian Church, Seattle May Memorial Church, Syracuse
(photos by author)

Two lesser-known examples of the mid-century building boom will illustrate variations on the democratic process and the spatial expression of democracy as a core value: University Unitarian Church in Seattle, designed by Paul Kirk, and May Memorial Unitarian Church in Syracuse, NY, designed by Pietro Belluschi. Additional references to well-known examples will help to illustrate democratic processes. A final consideration of the First Church of Boston recalls discontinuities in theology and architecture and a dis-interest in tradition; but more importantly it symbolizes the continuity of the community, of allegiance to an animating democratic spirit, and of faith in individual poetic genius in of the architecture of Unitarian churches.



First Church, Boston *(photo by author)*

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