

THE RELIGION WE BUILT IT FOR
Housewarming Sermon
October 4, 1964

The general loss of the natural instincts typical of our society, and, this knack of our technology of arranging the world so that we do not have to experience it, have rendered people less sensitive to subtle values and more vulnerable to the appeal of inadequate ones. So the architect must find within himself the eloquence to explain and to convince, and such a task does not always come easy. The burden that the creative person must bear is compounded by his own limitations, which he may or may not recognize, and by the limitations of the society in which he must operate.

The design of a House of Worship however comes closer to being pure Art, defined as an expression of the human spirit, than almost any other field of architecture. In a church, practical considerations are important but not paramount; what is paramount is the quality and drama of the space it contains. It is as a visual Art therefore that church architecture more than any other mirrors a civilization and its religious climate.

Our own modern movement in architecture began as a protest; the men responsible for its development meant to free architecture from forms which seemed to have spent themselves and become hollow. Tradition had become a collection of empty shells upon the beach of time from which a noncreative society in a hurry could draw or borrow with impunity. The word Beauty itself was comprised by external images of ideas long dead.

But tradition, in fact, was found to be change, evolution, search. It was found that to stand still and copy, or to be awed by the past symbols, was to weaken our own spiritual resources and to condemn our creative gifts to impotence – that the present, infinitely challenging, demands the utmost efforts from each of us – and that opportunities for thought and action exist all around us.

It would be foolish for me to try to simplify the infinitely complicated human situation. There have been infinite visions of Divine Power and infinite ways of defining Art – all seeking to reveal part of the mystery of life, a reason for their eternal appeal and for their continued renewal. We know that it is in the nature of man ever to probe beyond the boundaries of knowledge. He must forever find new expressions to witness his own deep concern, to forge new words and new meanings for old words, until he finds his own unique revelation of the inner harmony of the universe.

“No less than religion at its best, architecture at its best is witness and custodian of the spirit of modern man.” Pietro Belluschi, in *The Importance of Simplicity in Church Design*.

We have made it at last! The structure is finished! We are in it. We are at worship. And it is good. To be sure, there are things yet to come – things yet to stain, to paint, to attach, to plant, to install. And there are things of the free spirit we do not yet see or know about. But we have made it at last. The now structure is ours.

The quality and the drama of the space, which the architect, Pietro Belluschi, sought to make paramount are here. There is an elegant simplicity. The conception and its manifestations are witness and custodian of the spirit of modern man. And it has been now ten years since we ventured forth uncertainly to plan for it.

Two weeks ago we bid farewell to our old church, custodian and shelter of Unitarianism in Syracuse for eighty years. This day we begin a new era. We take possession of a new shelter

for the free spirit. We do not forget the old. Its spirit, its energy, its power of giving sustenance onto the liberal spirit in religion – these have made possible this hour, this structure, this dramatic space.

We were not forced to build a new church. We had a house. It held us. It served us. There was elegance and inspiration in it. And yet, there moved within us, as there moves in all free men, a desire, an urge, a restlessness to bear witness to our own time, to modern man, and to the vision of what we seek to be and to become. A free people must create or die; they must fashion anew for themselves; they must say, Behold, I am doing a new thing! This is creativeness! This is the free man's response to the creative powers of the universe. And this is the essence of liberal religion; to fashion our own world, our own insights, our own manifestations of truth and beauty and goodness. The creative spirit in us, its affirmation in all things, goes to make up the religion we built our new house for.

We built it, in great part, to express our own sense of the beautiful. Let me stress this. Our religion, Unitarianism, came forth long ago out of the rational and the mystical, the scientific and the individualistic ferments of the 16th and 17th centuries. It has battled four hundred years against the symbols of tradition and the authorities of old.

In revolting against tradition, Unitarianism had to exclude the art forms of traditional religion. Historically, this created a vacuum in our expressions of beauty – a sort of artless religion, even though fresh insight and content have come to our truth and ethics. And yet, in our esthetic limbo, we often embellished our churches with images of things past. We tried to make up for the vacuum. But we were not happy with that kind of beauty. The mind and the ethic of liberalism could not bear the imitation of things outworn and dead. And so we learned that in our art, as well as in our theology and morality, tradition truly meant change, tradition meant honesty and freshness, tradition meant creativity, evolution, search. The beautiful to us, therefore, is different from what it was two or three generations past. We have built a new church to add positive beauty to our truth and our ethic, and thus to make the three one. This, I believe is the necessary historical logic of Unitarianism – to make theology ethics and art of a piece. And it is for this that we built this house.

Thoreau said it better: "The sun shines also today. Why should not we enjoy an original relation to the universe? There are new lands, new men, and new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and law and worship." And I add – beauty, too.

This house as we have built contains no definite or little conclusions about the meaning of life or the truths of religion. You will find no little crosses embellishing the altar or any part of the place. You will find no little pictures in the windows telling of this or that Biblical story or personage. You will not even find an empty niche awaiting some statue of a Unitarian saint or martyr. You will find instead, expressed through this house, a free and open conception of religion – a freedom of space for the mind and heart, a warmth and welcome for the eye and the thought that wish to be universal and not sectarian. You will find a variety of height and depth, a vista and form, together with a simplicity, a repetition of line and texture, all together spelling the diversity of freedom and universality, united by the larger and eternal search of man for the nestling and depth of life.

We built this house as an expression of our desire for universality in religion, unshackled by images of what is dated, transient and particular. For every truth worth its salt is welcome in this space. As William Ellery Channing warned: "We must shun the spirit of sectarianism as from hell. We must shudder at the thought of shutting up God in any church."

And we have built our new church almost in the suburbs. We have moved from a downtown, an inner-city area, wherein exist and directly challenge the frontier problems of American society, morally, socially, economically, racially and politically. Out here in the almost-suburbs we find modern American civilization – nice people, nice homes, green lawns, trees, a brook, smooth roads, the smell of charcoal-broiled steak from back yards – all the comforts and affluence of our highest standard of living. Our new church fits comfortably and tastefully into the neighborhood. Its conception, its setting, its aspect, we know is an affluent one, even though a limited one.

But we stand in this place to be captured and corrupted by the affluence and the comfort. The risk is great. We have no Old Testament and jealous God to speak to us as He spoke to Israel long ago via the prophet Jeremiah: “Woe unto him that saith I will build me a wide house and spacious chambers, and cutteth him our windows; and it is ceilinged with cedar. Shalt thou flourish because thou excellent in cedar? Then hast thou devised shame to thy house and hast sinned against thy soul. The stone shall cry out of the wall and the beam out of the timber shall answer it.” No, we have no God who will so warn us. We must warn ourselves. The religion within us must tell us.

I do not think we have built this house – complete with cedar walls and cedar ceilings – for our own comfortable, affluent flourishing. I pray to all the gods of men we have not. We have built our house, I insist, for that religion which invites us to the fountain-heads of love and justice, or morality and right. We have built our beautiful house the better to inspire ourselves to serve our fellowman and our community.

I hope we shall always stand in fear of being irrelevant to and unconcerned with the despairs and joys, the sufferings and struggles of our fellowmen. Beauty must ever be of a piece with truth and goodness, lest it be shameful.

And I hope, in this new house and in our name as a church, we shall keep alive and intact the memory of Samuel Joseph May – especially his passionate concern for justice, right and mercy. It is for this ethically religious quality we have built this house. God help us, if we have not.

Creativeness, freedom, universality, beauty, and justice – it is for the religion which stresses these that we have built our new church. May the gods of truth bless us, and may our house be, as the mystic says, not an anchor, but a mast. Amen.