

“If These Walls Could Talk”

A talk given by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister,
as part of the Renovation Celebration and Building Rededication
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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<http://firstunitarian.org/assembly-september-17-if-these-walls-could-talk/>

A couple of months ago, I sat in on a weeklong religion class at Meadville Lombard, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago where I got my degree. I learned a lot of things that week, sitting class for seven hours a day. But among all the theological analyses and the stories of world religions, one simple quote stood out for me, and it was this: A building is an argument made of stone. A building is an argument made of stone — that line struck a chord with me because it made me think of all the things that were going on back here at First Unitarian Society, with our enormous renovation project. I thought, what arguments we might be making out of stone?

The quote is from [a book](#) by Peter Brown, a religious historian who retired from Princeton. Brown was born in Ireland, where countless stone structures of ancient peoples are still in place. Arranged in circles or balanced on top of each other, those Celtic stones are perhaps making their argument to the sun and moon for a good harvest, or to unseen powers for a good afterlife. We here at First Unitarian Society are merely the latest in a long line of human beings to move around stones and gravel and earth to create a structure that tells us something about who we are and what we hope for.

The tools are much more complex today, the materials much more varied, but the base motivations are the same – to express ourselves, to provide shelter, and to create a place to gather, for ourselves and for the generations to come.

It’s an interesting mental exercise to think of this building as an argument. This place certainly has seen an argument or two over the past few years, but that’s because it’s actually not possible to remodel anything without an argument unless you live alone and do all the work yourself. You know that even those ancient Celtic people had disagreements about which kind of rock should go where, and what color it should be, and would the remodeled circle really have room for the whole tribe to sit together at solstice? Humans certainly change and evolve, but we are also timeless in many aspects of our humanity.

So what argument might FUS be making with this newly updated building? When we first opened our doors here on Mount Curve in 1951, we had already been a congregation for seventy years. We had already long been arguing for a new kind of religion, one that focuses on the here and now, one that looks out to this world rather than up toward another.

And this building, right-angled and modern and flat-roofed, did exactly that. When you look toward our windows, you can see the knowable world, in real time; it's the highest-resolution screen there is. Our neighboring congregations along the avenue have stunning church architecture, palatial spaces worth visiting, with gorgeous stained glass telling ancient stories and spires reaching toward heaven. Our horizontal lines reflect our more horizontal theology – because there's so much right down here, to see and learn and do.

And by planting ourselves right here in the heart of the city, right near some of the most prominent congregations in Minnesota, we argued for our place at the table, for humanism's place in public life. Back then, the Unitarian movement to which we belonged was tiny, measured entirely on the small side of the decimal point. That has remained the case even in the era of a merged Unitarian Universalism. But theology is not and should not be a popularity contest. Each human heart believes what it must, and we have a right to express our personal theological orientations and form communities, and offer our ideas to the broader society.

Humanism as a global phenomenon has grown since this building made its debut, in part because we have kept the flame going, have kept the questions coming, have kept the doors open up here on Lowry Hill. We have held our own. We are here today because people who came before us believed in this place. We're here because we believe in this place, and we believe in its future.

And in an era when congregations of many kinds are shrinking or closing, we have just made a four-million-dollar argument that this place matters. It matters to us in this room, and it matters to the bright and beautiful children learning in their newly updated classrooms. It matters to the new faces who are not yet here with us, who will come seeking a theological home. It matters to the larger community, because we show up and help bring about change, whether by leading or by following others on the front lines. And we now have a healthier, fully accessible, year-round building that embodies our values – a humanist headquarters, if you will. A place to live out who we want to be, as individuals, as a congregation, and in the broader community.

As you may have noticed, the building project is not entirely done. Just as the great cathedral-builders of Europe were delayed whenever they found extra asbestos, so too are we a few weeks behind schedule. These discoveries put a bit of a dent in the budget, and unlike those cathedral builders, we don't have a king to give us more money, so our fundraising work will continue. (It should be noted that there's hardly a cause more worthy than safely removing a dangerous material from one's home.) After that, we hope everyone can take a well-deserved break from all the hard work to enjoy all that has been accomplished with our remarkable new physical space. Then we can take a breath and listen to what these walls, with all their stories, are calling us to do.

And when we do take that time to reflect, it will be good for us to remember that, while a building may pose some excellent arguments, it is not a substitute for a mission. An improved building is an essential goal, but it is not an end in itself.

Denise Scott Brown, one of the more influential architects of the 20th century, tells us as much. Denise has been designing buildings since not long after this building opened, and she's still at it at the age of 85. She was a pioneer in a male-dominated field and has had to work hard to make her voice heard, but she finds her calling immensely fulfilling. [In an interview several years back](#), she talked about what it was like for her to visit one of the buildings that she had designed. "It's a joy to go there," she said, "and see people actually congregating where I planned that they would." Our spaces influence our behavior in ways we may not even be aware of, and good design can produce good outcomes.

But Denise Scott Brown reminds us that there's a limit to what the physical world can do. She says this: "Architecture can't force people to connect. It can only plan the crossing points, remove barriers, and make the meeting places useful and attractive." Our new building can do many things, but it can't do anything without us.

This points to the challenge of being a humanist: When you believe in human agency, when you believe that what we do in the here and now matters most, when you believe that heaven is ours to bring about, there's always more to do. There's always more to learn, always another question to ask, always another fellow human to connect with, or to help, or to join with in creating some joy. Humanism is not for the lazy. There's a reason we serve so much coffee.

So maybe that's what these walls calling us to do – to be ready to make more human connections and make the most of this building. Because you know what? I think we're going to have some company coming over, possibly a lot of stopping by to check us out. We are no longer hidden from the street and from [the Sculpture Garden](#). Our

new outdoor staircase and ramp are beckoning to the city, and our clear new windows are inviting everyone to take a fresh look inside.

So as we head today into the rest of our celebration, our celebration of beauty and generosity and achievement, I leave us with this question:

“What would it be like if every kind-hearted humanist who came through our doors could find a place here?”

These walls are telling us that it’s time to find out.