

Unitarian Church North Architectural Profile

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In May of 1984, after 20 years of renting space on Sundays, the Universalist Church North (UCN) congregation voted to accept a Building Committee proposal to build an octagonal barn structure in the tradition of the Clausing Barns built along Port Washington Road during the late 1800s. Kubala Washatko Architects, a local firm in nearby Cedarburg, was retained for design and construction management. April 1986 saw the groundbreaking for a new church with a July 1987 ribbon cutting ceremony whereby the members took possession of their new building.

On September 13, 1987, the first regular Sunday service in the new building took place with a ceremonial walk from the old location on Mequon Road to the new church home, symbolizing “A Moving Experience.” The new church was dedicated on October 4, 1987, at 13800 North Port Washington Road in Mequon and was 9,592 square feet including a 1,194 square foot mezzanine behind the assembly space.

Continued growth led to plans for an addition and remodel. On April 12, 2005, a building permit was issued by the City of Mequon for TDI Associates of Waukesha (Wisconsin) to design an addition bringing the total square footage of the building to 11,500 square feet and increasing the paved parking lot from 32 spaces to 96. The plans submitted also indicate future additions of a two-story octagonal building (smaller than the existing church octagon and shown as one room) north of the 2005 addition and another addition in a rectangular shape at the east end of the 2005 addition. The rectangular addition is shown as a two-story building with 15 classrooms/meeting rooms and additional restrooms.

The property, according to 2021 tax documents, is 9.148 acres with at least 84% of it as open space. The 2005 building permit showed two parcels: a southern parcel that the church building occupies at 7.5 acres and a northern parcel of 10.87 acres holding a frame house, barn, and outbuildings. According to Amanda Seligman, church historian, these were once used as educational classrooms, but the northern property was eventually sold, being too expensive for the church to hold.

The original 1986 church building is modeled after the octagonal barns built in the immediate area by Ernst Clausing, one of which had stood until 1983 just south of the church. The advantages to farmers of these uniquely shaped barns were that they enclosed the largest amount of space with the least amount of building material, withstood the winds off Lake Michigan better than a conventional rectangular barn, and create a large, open space without obstructions. These barns varied in size from 60 to 64 feet in diameter and stood 40 to 45 feet from the floor to the ventilating cupola. The church octagonal “barn” is about 74 feet in diameter. An article in the *Milwaukee Journal* from November 4, 1984, describing the history of the octagonal barns in the area is included in the UCN archives and was likely instrumental in the idea of building one for the church.

Notable features of the building include its accessibility, its barn-like structure and materials, and forward-thinking environmental features. Even in 1986, before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, members indicated that wheelchair access was mandatory throughout the upper level (an

elevator to the lower level was installed in the 2005 addition). Cedar cladding, “native stone” for the 20” foundation walls, and structural timber frames are used in the building. The Douglas Fir timber was harvested in Oregon, machined, and cut to size in Montana, and trucked to the site in four semis. The original main entrance is two barn-style doors. Weathered barn boards were reportedly incorporated into the pulpit and timbers from a Clausing barn that had blown down a few years before were used in the screen behind the lectern. Of interest are names given to certain features: the cupola at the top is termed a “beacon” and the main assembly area is called the “meeting room.” A hydronic heating system is used (radiant concrete floor), which was novel for the time. Today, electric car outlets are available in the rear parking lot as is a small bike rack, both quite unusual for the rural area. Lastly, a “peace pole” stands outside represented in four languages.

The choice of an octagonal barn for their church is highly significant for this congregation. The members desired to create a presence in their community yet be compatible with the environment. The shape of the roof directs one’s attention upward and not on the minister and pulpit. According to Brent Smith, minister at the time of the construction, it “provides a setting that implies equality among people who are trying to find truth” in that the congregation is seated so they can see each other while the minister speaks from the same level as the congregation (although today there is a slight platform for the lectern). He stated that “this building will be a rare connection of people, to land, to history, to religious vision.” Open space surrounding the new church is left natural or restored to native prairie because the “congregation sees itself in relation to nature” and the building “reflects the philosophy of Frank Lloyd Wright, a Unitarian, who believed a structure should connect human beings with nature.” The building committee was concerned with an economical use of space with the ability for expansion and made many notes in church archives about the important symbolism of the new church building. It is noted that the circular form is symbolic to Unitarians, symbolically appropriate for liberal religious organizations, and that the use of the octagon by Thomas Jefferson in his designs, someone who was close to nature in his work as a farmer. Their proposal includes a quote about American farmers that “these people are so sure of their future that they spend a lifetime building barns for future generations” and states that “the octagonal barn provides an opportunity to pass on to other generations... a unique and precious heritage of our common past.”

Specific observations about the building and its symbols tell us much about the character of the congregation. Chairs, not pews, are used in the meeting room so that they can be oriented toward the center or rearranged for other purposes. A “flaming chalice” is present adjacent to the lectern as an important symbol to the Unitarians. It represents light, a frequent image throughout the building. Opposite the flaming chalice is a table upon which a bowl of sand is placed before Sunday services. Members may place a lighted candle in the sand to represent their “joys and sorrows” to be shared with the community. A quilt behind the lectern is part of a changing display of artwork. Name tags are present for each attendee (regulars have theirs stored in an entryway; anyone may add theirs to the collection) in the spirit of welcoming and declaring that no one is a stranger. Numerous signs, brochures, and wall art proclaim that diversity is welcome. A welcome card describes the building and grounds as including: an 8-acre natural landscape of tall grasses, prairie flowers, and other native plants with a landscape policy to keep all introduced plants native to the area and planted in informal, natural arrangements; a woodland nature trail; a footbridge over a pond; a fire-council ring; a gazebo; children’s play area; and “a place for nature study as well as fellowship”. Rooms in the lower level are named for famous Unitarians such as Jane Addams, Clara Barton, and Dr. Suess. These rooms are available for long-term rental. The renters appear to be in alignment with the principles of Unitarianism, being mostly social services or “natural” philosophies such as

homeopathic healing and meditations. The church is also used as a city of Mequon voting location in an effort by the congregation to be open and welcoming to all.





Resources

Unitarian Church North Mequon Church Archives
Interview with Amanda Seligman, Church Historian
Personal observations of Bridget Greuel on February 25, 2022
City of Mequon Building Permits and Submitted Drawings for 2005 addition