

The USHer

Your guide to the heart of the Unitarian Society of Hartford



*The brand new USH as it looked in 1965 as seen from the parking lot
with its original black neoprene roof.*

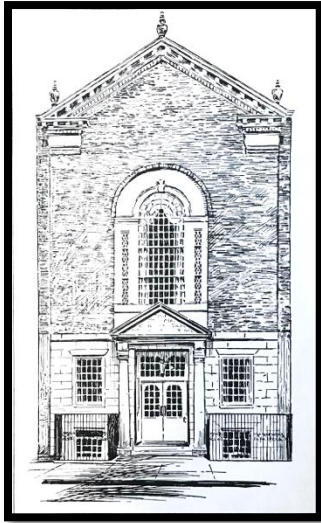
This special issue of The USHer tells the story of our building in honor of its induction to the
National Register of Historic Places.

Beginnings

The story of our building starts in the 1950s at 215 Pearl Street in downtown Hartford, CT. World War II was over and, mercifully, it had not been fought on our soil. Europe had to rebuild, but we did not and the United States soared to an unprecedented prosperity and optimism for the future. GIs had come home to the joyful arms of wives, girlfriends and extended families. Within a few years, there were children everywhere, now known as the Baby Boom generation.

In the 1950s most Americans went to church weekly and the Unitarian Meeting House on Pearl Street was bursting at the seams. Meant to hold no more than 250 people, the church now had

372 members and a mailing list of over 800 occasional drop-ins. The Sunday school simply could not accommodate almost 200 children!



215 Pearl Street

Spurred on by their minister, Rev. Payson Miller, the congregation considered various alternatives and finally decided to build a new church. They bought a six-acre parcel for \$50,000 in the northwest corner of the city from Watkinson School. Synchronistically, the land had once belonged to Anna Watkinson Wells, one of the original founders of the Hartford Unitarian Society back in the early 1800s.

Without wasting any time, Rev. Miller and the Building Committee got to work interviewing architects. Meanwhile, sixty miles away in Westport CT, a young architect, Victor Lundy, was underway building a Unitarian church. Rev. Arnold Westwood, minister of the Westport congregation, gave Lundy glowing references and in 1959 the Building Committee asked Lundy to come to Hartford for a talk.

Rev. Payson Miller

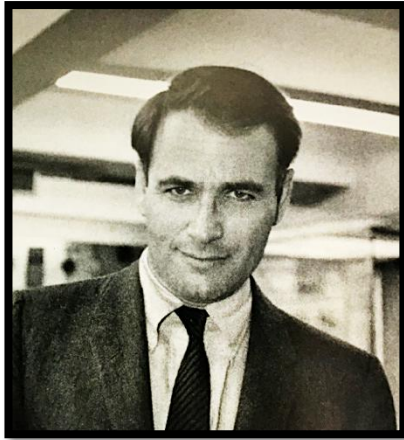
Rev. Payson Miller was a theist and a serious intellectual. He believed God to be a mystic unity that pervades all being. Miller's God was visible in the world as The Good, The True, The Beautiful and Love. Like the Greeks he believed that all of us inherently strive for these attributes and that we can draw closer to the divine by following a path from the Beautiful to the Good and ultimately to universal Truth and unconditional Love. To greatly oversimplify Greek philosophy, the concept holds that when people are immersed in The Beautiful, they naturally lean toward The Good. The more they lean toward The Good, the more they approach The Ultimate Truth: a God of Love. The Greek ideals were important to Rev. Miller as an entry point to experience the divine. But he also wanted the building to express core Unitarian values. He told Lundy he wanted a building that came up out of the ground and represented many paths to a single Universal Truth.



Rev. Payson Miller

Payson Miller was a hands-on administrator who took a strong leadership role with his congregation and the design of our building was no exception. Miller and the Building Committee liked Lundy's artistic use of light and shadow and his affinity for natural materials: cement, glass and lots of wood. They looked at the plans for the Westport church which has glass walls that open the sanctuary to nature but Rev. Miller advocated for an enclosed sanctuary that would encourage turning inward. The placement of the sanctuary in the center would signify that the sacred is central to our religious life.

Victor Lundy: Artist/Architect



Victor Lundy in 1960

Victor Lundy is a story unto himself. An accomplished artist and World War II Purple Heart veteran, Lundy filled 27 sketchbooks during the war. The eight sketchbooks that survived the war are held at the National Library of Congress, full of realistic pencil sketches showing GIs caught candidly unaware. During this period and shortly after the war he made hundreds of sketches of European churches and cathedrals. Back in the States after the war, people expected him to become a fine artist, but instead he completed the architecture degree he had started before the war. He used his drawing skills to quickly establish a name for himself in Modernist architectural design. Over a career that spanned nearly six decades, he was often chosen to design sacred spaces. His

buildings are known for their bold roofs. In 1960, *Time* magazine wrote that his designs seemed “to make a whole building out of a roof.” In a 1962 interview with *Architectural Record*, Lundy said “My buildings tend to have a strong easily recognized image, because I try to make architecture say something boldly, simply and clearly.” When talking about his churches, Lundy said that they tend to sweep upward “because I’m an incurable optimist.” If you are interested to know more about Lundy, see the documentary *Victor Lundy: Sculptor of Space*, available to watch free on YouTube. Or read the book *Victor Lundy: Artist Architect* by Donna Kacmar.

A Unitarian Sculpture

In Hartford, Lundy proved to be a good listener. He caught on quite naturally to Payson Miller’s “many paths” concept. Lundy described his design as a “symbolic and lyrical interpretation” of Unitarianism. Twelve steel-reinforced concrete supports, also known as buttresses, rise above the roofline instead of a steeple that would suggest one single path. The concrete buttresses are of different heights and irregularly spaced symbolizing individuality and the many paths people take toward the sacred. Yet Lundy went even further in his interpretation of Unitarianism by making these concrete buttresses actually hold up the sanctuary roof, much like the concept of “many paths” as an essential belief that “holds up” the Unitarian faith. Lundy’s choice of a round structure echoes the idea that no one path to religious Truth is more important than another.

He sketched the central enclosed sanctuary Rev. Miller had asked for and he expanded the idea by circling the sanctuary with a wide hallway (the ambulatory) featuring rooms all along the perimeter. Mahogany veneer walls along the ambulatory soften the exposed concrete. Each room has plenty of natural light and access to the outdoors, symbolizing the essential freedom inherent in Unitarianism. Wide entrances on three sides of the building welcome people “from all different walks” and all different beliefs. A person could start a spiritual journey from any

direction and reach the sanctuary in the center. Lundy wanted the entire building to give the feeling of being open and welcoming. He designed a chapel, tucked behind the chancel, with a wall of glass looking out to the woods.

Lundy's sanctuary draws people in for worship. Although it is an enclosed space, it is spacious; no pillars, columns or cement walls interrupt sight lines. The ceiling forms a graceful curved canopy of honey colored wood "rays" which some feel harkens to the shape of an ancient prayer tent. Like beams of golden light, the wood emanates from the pinnacle of the ceiling like rays radiating from the sun.



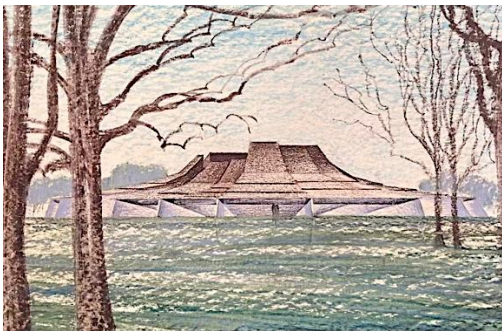
Sanctuary, circa 1964

When people drive past the Unitarian Society of Hartford (USH) today and look down across the lawn, their eyes are drawn to the circular building and Lundy's signature roof. What is not visible from the road is the unique system of steel cables that support it. Traditional roofs are supported by trusses firmly attached to the frame of the building. The USH roof is built more like a suspension bridge. Lundy designed the roof panels to move in a brisk wind, making it a *living* rather than a *static* structure. The roof was positioned to ensure that the sanctuary ceiling was as high as possible for good acoustic quality. Indeed, the acoustics in the sanctuary are excellent, but the unconventional nature of the roof construction caused more than a few headaches.



Looking upward from the ambulatory, you can see a (blue) clerestory window and two of the yellow lines of cables that hold up the roof.

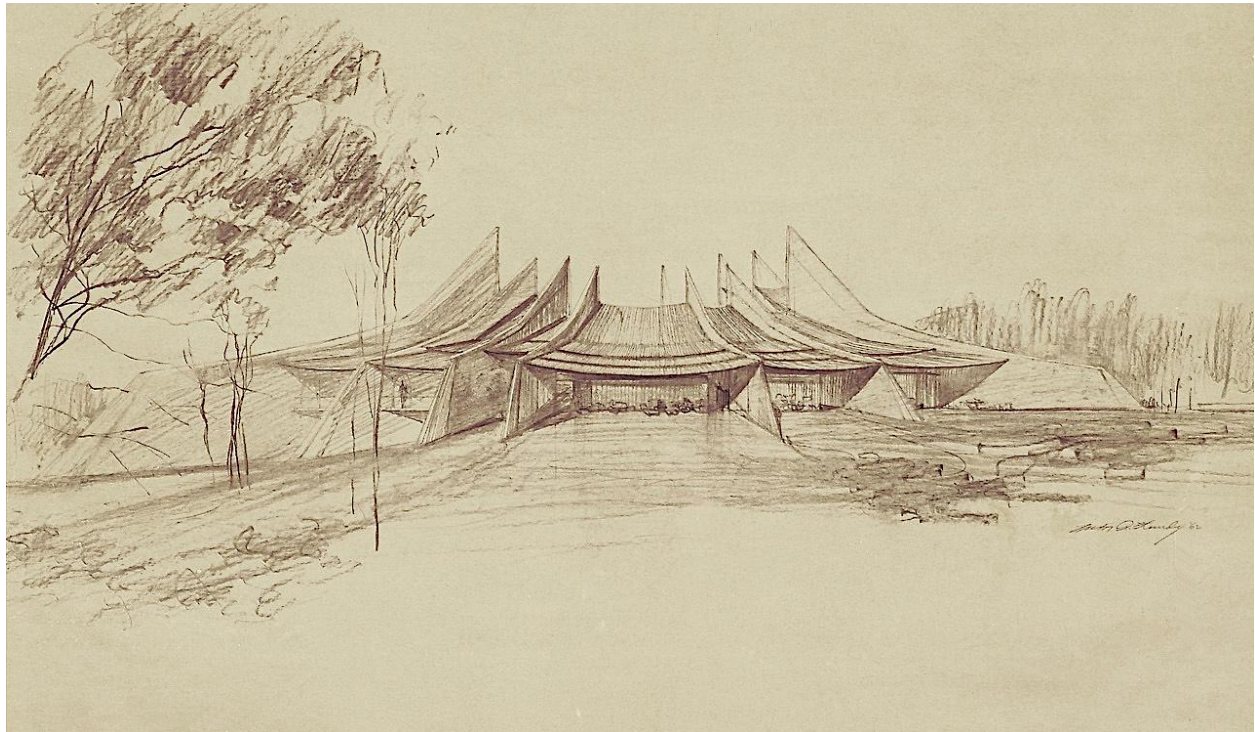
Setbacks



Getting to the final design had a number of significant snags. In 1961, with everyone's hopes

riding high, Lundy presented several pastel drawings to Payson Miller and the Building Committee only to be met with shrugs and indifferent responses.

Those sketches show the basic design of the building complete with concrete buttresses but the roofline is blunt. Lundy was sent back to his drawing board, left to think how he could salvage this big project. Finally he came up with a pencil sketch that shows the twelve concrete spires with their full upward reach, culminating in points. Everyone agreed the sketch was a winner and it would be shown to the whole congregation and put to a vote. It's easy to imagine Payson Miller circulating during many coffee hours selling the design to his congregants.



The winning pencil sketch.

Despite Payson Miller's fervent advocacy, in the fall of 1961 the congregation got cold feet. Some felt the design did not appeal to their aesthetic. Many others took issue with the countless Modernist innovations Lundy was using. Of particular concern was the roof design. A roof made of panels strung along cables that actually moved in the wind proved to be a deal breaker. In October 1961, the congregation voted down the design. Within days Rev. Payson Miller had a heart attack and died.

In truth, Miller's heart had been broken twice in quick succession. Even as he was investing many hours of time and emotional energy in his church-building project, he was putting nearly the same energy into a losing battle to stop the Unitarian Universalist merger. Even with the weight of their own minister's opposition, Miller's congregation approved the merger. Later it was approved by the General Assembly and the merger officially took effect in May 1961. However, regional implementation lagged a few months behind. The newly formed UU Connecticut Valley District met at the Universalist Church of West Hartford on October 28, 1961

and Rev. Miller was snubbed at that meeting for his opposing view. It was later that same evening that he died at the Girard Street parsonage.

Miller's longtime friend, Rev. Dr. Charles R. Joy, conducted the memorial service on November 4 and alluded to "the church you are about to build here." A few weeks later the congregation reversed its decision and decided to go ahead with Lundy's design as a memorial to Payson Miller. The project was now a "go" but without its main advocate. And, to complicate things, the congregation had to start the search for a new minister.

Building The Church



During the first weeks of construction, cement is poured into forms for the buttresses.

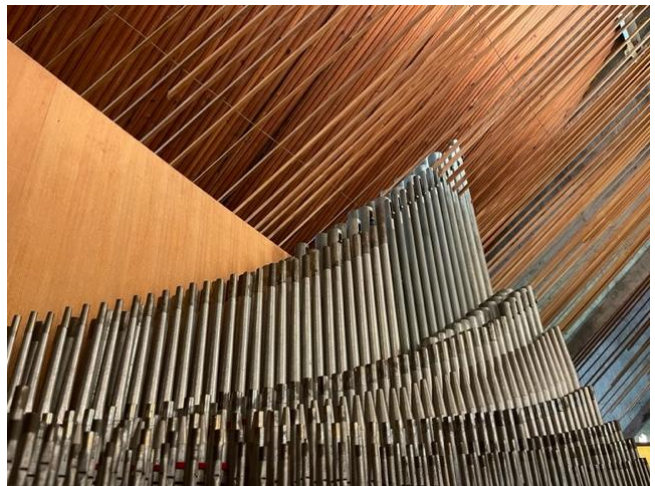
In the fall of 1962, the Building Committee put Lundy's church design out to bid. The contract went to Matthew Reiser, a local builder who had recently built a fairly simple contemporary-style church in Windsor Locks. Reiser also came in with the lowest bid at \$569,000. By the spring of 1963, Matt Reiser and his crew were making progress on the building. At around this

time, Victor Lundy opened an office in Guilford, CT, making him available to track the construction.

Almost immediately there were problems. Many of the innovative construction techniques that Lundy specified were unknown to Reiser, as they would have been to any other local contractor. Although the design appeared to work on paper, it had not been tested in real life. The concrete buttresses that hold the building up were the first to be built. They were poured on site using scaffolding and huge forms. When they were finished Lundy dropped in for a visit and was very displeased. His artist's eye went right to rough spots, irregularities and the non-uniform appearance of the concrete walls. This particularly bothered Lundy because light from the high clerestory windows would reflect on the concrete emphasizing these problems. Lundy put it in writing: "I want perfectly straight surfaces." By now it was the fall of 1963 and construction shut down for the winter, allowing everyone to (mostly) regain their composure and regroup. In the early months of 1964, the congregation bit the bullet for the first of many cost overruns and paid to have all 12 buttresses sandblasted. However, more problems arose in quick succession and the cost crept up and up. By far the biggest problem was the roof which leaked from the start.

Financial constraints forced the congregation to make a tough choice: an organ or Fellowship Hall? It couldn't be both. Since music was such a key part of uplifting spirits during worship, the congregation voted for the organ, which was purchased from the Austin Organ company, still operating today in Hartford.

From an original bid of \$569,000, the tally on opening day, December 6, 1964, including the organ, was \$750,000. If we carry that forward to today's dollars, that figure would approach \$8 million. And that's without Fellowship Hall. The two staircases in the lobby went down to a dirt basement with a furnace room and a tool closet – no bathrooms, no kitchen, no classrooms, no gathering space. In spite of the rough-around-the-edges appearance, membership quickly shot up to 500 where it held steady for the next three decades. It is worth noting that those 500 members were adults who brought with them nearly 300 Baby Boom children!



Austin organ pipes became part of the design.

Rev. Nathaniel Lauriat



Rev. Nathaniel Lauriat

In 1963, amidst a bumpy transition and the start of a difficult construction project, the new minister arrived. A life-long Boston Unitarian, Rev. Nathaniel Lauriat was 40 years old. He settled into the Girard Street parsonage along with his wife Jane and two small daughters. The Pearl Street building had been sold to raise money. Consequently the congregation was relegated to cramped rented quarters at Hartford Seminary for services.



Construction circa 1963 approximate to Nat Lauriat's arrival.

This could not have been an easy start for Nat amid multiple stressors of rented space, the mess of construction, getting to know a new congregation and writing a weekly sermon. Somehow he found the fortitude to stay cheerful and, as is our longstanding tradition in Hartford, Nat had the considerable benefit of strong lay leadership. Rev. Lauriat led the congregation until his retirement in 1985, overseeing the dedication of the building and countless improvements, including much needed soundproofing.

Construction on Fellowship Hall resumed in 1967 when funds became available. Roy Cook, an architect and congregant, donated his time and skill to follow Lundy's original plan for Fellowship Hall. This project was completed in 1968 much to the relief of the congregation.

Later Improvements



Memorial Garden.

In 1991, landscaping efforts softened the edges of the lawn surrounding the building and added many deciduous trees, including ornamentals like dogwood, crab trees, birch and sugar maples. At this time, a small Memorial Garden was begun near the southeast entrance. In 1999, an anonymous donor provided funds to develop the Memorial Garden with a patio, benches and plantings selected to bloom throughout the growing season. A *Tree of Life* metal sculpture designed by Roy Cook and made by member John Stowe was mounted on the west wall along with a plaque identifying the Memorial Garden area. Later a Pet Memorial Garden was built near the parking lot. A children's playground and three solar arrays were added to the southwest corner of the property between 2009-2022.

Looking Good...With Some Effort

Victor Lundy wanted cedar shingles on the roof, an expense that was ruled out immediately. The original black neoprene (rubber) roof leaked persistently. No doubt expensive shingles would have leaked, too. The wind-induced sway of the cables is still a constant invitation for water to enter. In 1970, an adhered rubber membrane was added to no avail, followed by another attempt a few years later with similar material (also a failure). In 1984, Roy Cook, our “resident architect,” designed a single ply EPDM (ethylene propylene diene terpolymer) covering for the roof. This, along with lining Lundy’s original drains hidden within the buttresses, stopped leaks but only on the periphery of the roof. Other attempts to seal leaks continued as the years went by. In 2018, a new polyurethane coating was added and this one is the best yet with so little leakage that pew cushions became possible. Over the years the roof has gone from its original black to lighter colors in ongoing efforts to find materials that both reflect heat and prevent leaks.



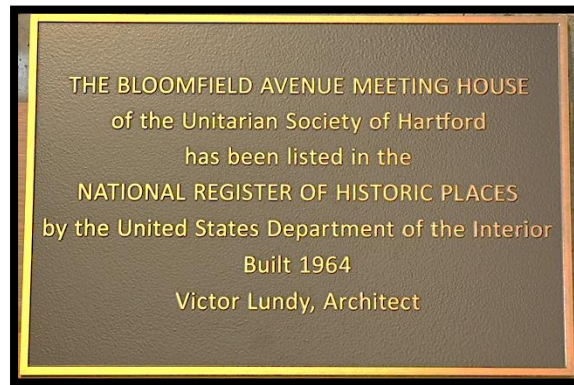
USH sanctuary as it looks in 2025

When asked about church upkeep, church sexton, Kevin Girouard laughs with good-natured affection: “Let’s just say the building is high maintenance.” The Chair of the University of Hartford’s Department of Architecture, Michael Crosbie, expressed the feelings of many congregants in an article he wrote for the Hartford Courant in 2018 when he said that putting up with some inconvenience is a small price to pay for worshipping in a work of art.

Rev. Payson Miller Memorialized

Payson Miller died before knowing that his dear church would be built, much less named to the National Register of Historic Places. In his memory, a sculptural bust of Miller presides over the chapel named for him. We think he would be pleased that his vision was realized: a church that encourages its members toward the sacred by embracing the Greek ideals of The Beautiful, Good and True. He would be delighted to see a building that “comes up out of the ground” and symbolically expresses bedrock Unitarian beliefs in sculptural form while welcoming visitors from all directions.

The Journey



USHer Editor, Judy Robbins, writer of this issue, wishes to thank innumerable people who provided information for this special issue by telling stories, providing stacks of old magazine and newspaper articles, books, video, and other resources. The book, *Hartford Unitarianism 1844-1994* by Freeman Meyer was an especially helpful reference. Special thanks to Toni Gold who advocated for the National Register status and convinced us we qualified. Hats off to all of those who worked on the original proposal and started the ball rolling. Particularly helpful to us were: Mary Dunne, Grants Coordinator at the State Historic Preservation Office; Mary Falvey, Executive Director of the Hartford Preservation Alliance and Jenny Fields Scofield, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer and National Register Coordinator. For this issue, special thanks go to David Newton, Evan Williams, Sue Smolski, Larry Lunden, Kevin Girouard and many more. For cheerful encouragement, thanks go to Rev. Bob Janis and Karolina Wojtysko.

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