

Fun Facts About Our Building



THE CHURCH BUILDING, completed in 1918, is an example of the Colonial Revival style, which reproduces an eighteenth century house of worship typical of the New England region where Unitarianism originated. Many Unitarian churches built in the 1920's were done in this style.

The chief designer of the building, Alan MacDonald, was only 25-years old.

Former U.S. President William Howard Taft, a Unitarian, officiated at the cornerstone-laying ceremony in 1917. A copper box of "church records" was placed under the cornerstone.

Costs of the building were originally estimated at \$47,000; costs ballooned to \$64,000 by time of completion. Except for a \$10,000 loan, the building was fully paid for when first occupied.

The architectural term for one of the porthole windows on the east and west sides of the church is oculus. Plural: oculi.

The columns on the portico are in the Ionic style, and are hollow. Each is composed of a wooden shell of tongue-and-groove interlocking wood; the shell surrounds a structural steel beam in its center. The columns in the sanctuary are also done in the Ionic style, and are likely also hollow with structural steel in the center.

The attic stairway is shown as a circular stairway on the building's original blueprints. The stairway up to the organ loft is a cantilevered floating design. (Check it out.) The organ loft was a choir loft until 1938, when our Aeolian-Skinner organ, donated by Sarah Joslyn, was installed.

THE RE WING WAS CONSTRUCTED in 1952 for \$45,000, which was paid from proceeds of loans from the Unitarian Universalist Association's predecessor and a local bank, and from church member donations. It has steel windows, no insulation and was designed to complement architectural features of the church building.

The construction of the RE wing partially covered up two of the sanctuary windows. Sometime afterwards, church member Dan Sullivan installed inward-facing mirrors in the window panes of those two windows to improve the "view" from the sanctuary.

Fire broke out on the roof of the building in 1983, doing an estimated \$20,000 in damage to the structure according to a newspaper report. In addition, another \$125,000 in smoke and water damage was done to the organ pipes and supporting equipment located in the loft and to "irreplaceable" books in the basement. At the time of the fire, the buildings were undergoing a three year \$100,000 renovation. The cause of the fire was blamed on a workman's discarded cigarette. This would be the last time the roof on

the RE wing and the church building were replaced. The RE wing roof is being replaced in December 2024.



THE LAST TIME THE STEEPLE was repainted was 2004, under Dick Joslin, then board president. There was a tense Board meeting over cost overruns with the original contractor and a second contractor was hired to finish the work.

A three-foot wooden finial fell from the steeple about five years ago; it was recovered and since that time it has been stored in the basement furnace room of the church. A second finial fell on December 19, 2024; it also awaits re-installation.

The octagonal cupola of the steeple features eight windows, each with eleven panes of glass. The windows were restored in 2012 at the cost of \$3,200; it is believed that a church member, the late Dean Christensen, paid the cost. The dome also features eight finials; these finials are smaller than, but of the same design as, the four finials that surround the cupola.

THE SANCTUARY WINDOWS are double-hung divided-light windows having a total of 35 panes of glass in the upper sash and 20 panes of glass in the lower sash. Both sashes were originally designed to be opened for ventilation. Each upper sash was opened using a long pole which had a hook on the end; the end of the hook was inserted into a small metal indentation at the top of the sash. The metal concave “button” is still visible on the top rail of many of the upper sashes.

The refurbishment of the sanctuary windows will maintain the operability of the lower sashes, but the upper sashes will not be moveable.



THE ORIGINAL FLOOR of the Common Room was replaced around 1980 with a wood floor that was reclaimed from the old Orchard and Wilhelm Furniture Store in downtown Omaha. Church members, led by Dan Sullivan, removed the floor planks from the downtown building and installed them in the Common Room using, as Dan recalls, “heavy mallets.” The floor planks were free to the church, as the building was scheduled to be demolished to make way for OPPD’s Energy Plaza.

Some of this material is taken from Pillars & Dreams: A History of the First Unitarian Church of Omaha by Dave Richardson.

