

The Meetinghouse

United Church on the Green
New Haven, Connecticut 06511

Preface:

This brochure briefly describes the history and structure of the Meetinghouse of the United Church on the Green in New Haven, Connecticut.

The information herein relies heavily on a lovely small book by Elizabeth Mills Brown, *The United Church on the Green: An Architectural History (1965)*, published on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the dedication of the building.

Why a Meetinghouse?

The church of the United Church refers to the people who gather to worship in the Meetinghouse. This terminology comes from the early English Puritan settlers who created a theocracy here, leaving the earlier settlement in Boston. The meetinghouse was a political as well as a religious structure, though the settlers would not have acknowledged the distinction.

The reformed tradition centered on the Word of God (Jesus) as revealed in the Written Word (the Bible) and in nature (the book of creation), and as understood by believers through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the preacher. All believers were equally part of the "priesthood." The meetinghouse was not a "sanctuary" from the world, but was open to the world and engaged with it. There was no altar at which to worship. This meetinghouse embodies those beliefs.

The three churches on the Green

The three churches on the Green in New Haven were all built between 1813 and 1815 and probably designed in 1812. The two Congregational meetinghouses are in the federal style popular in the United States at the time. Trinity Church (Episcopal) is one of the first churches built in the Gothic style in the United States.

Wood for the structures was shipped down the Connecticut River and ran into the British blockade of the New Haven harbor. Commodore Hardy, granting its entry, said he was not making war on religion but wondered at the "devilish piety" of a town that was building three churches during wartime.

The Federal Style

The federal style was popular for public buildings during the early decades of the new United States. It harkened back to the classical age of learning and the beginnings of democracy in Greece, as well as to their rebirth in Renaissance humanism.

The earliest meetinghouses in the colonial period were of wood, painted white, frequently without steeple or ornament of any kind, square with a central aisle leading to and focused on the pulpit. A meetinghouse in a prosperous town was often rectangular, sometimes with a steeple at the gable (short) end of the building, but the main door was traditionally in the middle of the long side. Thus there was some confusion about where the “front” of the building was.

The new generation of federal churches, based on an original design by Bullfinch of Boston, had more substantial towers built into the structure of the building and broadened at the base to form a vestibule, with the main doors moved to the gable end. Accordingly, the center aisle proceeded from the base of the steeple to the always dominant pulpit, which migrated from the side to the opposite end. The doors in the long side disappeared, and the new design presented an imposing and unequivocal front to the street. This form seems absolutely natural to us now, but it was at the time a radical innovation.

This meetinghouse is a grand and prosperous version of the new federal style, appropriate for a confident and growing city taking its place in a proud new democracy. In the interior are numerous elegant neoclassical features, including Ionic and Corinthian columns and pilasters, the domed and decorated ceiling, and the dentil molding around the galleries.

The Public Square

With the building of the three churches New Haven joined a stylistic movement begun in Boston and later adopted by Hartford with their new brick church and statehouse in Bullfinch’s design. Ironically, prosperity came to New Haven with the war of 1812, and the simultaneous appearance of the three churches on the green produced a quite new urban design, rescuing the green from its rather untidy pasturage, burying ground, and sometime swamp.

Streets lined with elms replaced dirt roads, and the town green, anchored by the three churches and surrounded by elegant mansions, stores, offices, and Yale, truly became the public square, the central square of New Haven’s original nine-square grid.

Ithiel Town wrote, “Perhaps the situation of these three Churches, in a line nearly equidistant, and viewed in connection with the other buildings round the public square, is not surpassed by any arrangement of the kind in this country.” And in

1830, an article in the *American Journal of Science and Arts* cites New Haven as an example of the new science of town planning, saying, “New Haven has now taken a character through the land that draws to it crowds of visitors, a character above all price. . . . When it is spoken of, it is always as the ‘beautiful city.’”

The Meetinghouse Building

There is considerable confusion about who the “architects” of the churches were, in part because the term as we know it was not then in use. Ithiel Town is usually identified as the builder of Center and Trinity, and Ebenezer Johnson Jr. or David Hoadley as the builder of United (then called the North Church).

Whoever deserves credit for the design of United drew freely from other meetinghouses. There are marked similarities with meetinghouses and churches in London, New York, Boston, Old Lyme, Meriden, and Derby. Distinctive features include the unpainted brick structure, the integration of the tower into the body of the building, and the rounded cupola (perhaps not to compete with the spire of the neighboring meetinghouse on the Green). Similarities with Center Church are apparent.

The original meetinghouse was much as you see it today, though there have been modifications and renovations over the years.

- 1842: The large window above and behind the pulpit was closed.
- 1849-50: The galleries were lowered; the recess in the wall behind the pulpit was created and a hand-carved pulpit was installed; a new organ was installed in the gallery; and the exterior, including the bricks, were painted white. In addition gas lights and a furnace were installed. The box pews, common in early unheated churches, had been designed to keep in the heat provided by small braziers carried by the faithful to help them survive the very long Sunday services. The new furnace was surely much appreciated! The architect for this renovation was Sidney Mason Stone. The cost, \$10,000, was more than a third of the original construction cost.
- 1887: The pitch of the galleries was lowered and the original circular staircases to the galleries were replaced by square staircases similar to the present ones. The architect was David R. Brown.
- 1920s: The original wooden paneling in the audience (meeting) room was removed.
- 1937: The exterior brickwork was sandblasted and returned to its original condition.
- 1967: A half-million-dollar renovation project was completed to coincide with the 225th anniversary of the church. A new pulpit was installed that was more in keeping with the style of the meeting house, stairs to the galleries were constructed on either side of the pulpit, the chandelier was restored, and the “deacon’s room” behind the organ (now the choir room) was redecorated. The architect for the renovation was Gerald L. K. Watland. A new Hillebrand organ (the first in the U.S.) was installed in

memory of Minna W. Smith. It is a three-manual, tracker-action instrument with 56 ranks and 41 stops over four divisions. The crawl space beneath the meetinghouse was excavated and a new space created that included a large meeting room with kitchen, a pastor's study, a sacristy, and relocated and improved lavatories. New heating and fire-alarm systems, and electronic hearing aid and public address system were installed. For safety, new exit doors were installed in the outside walls at the front corners of the audience room. The Easter service in 1967 celebrated the completion of this renovation and was telecast nationwide on CBS.

- 1990-2014: Most recently the church has undertaken systematic maintenance planning and funding. Major renovation of the lower level greatly improved function space and addressed ongoing problems with dampness. The organ was restored, and accessibility improved. And innumerable repairs and improvements to the steeple, roof, windows, doors, interior painting, and signage continue to be attended to.

United Church on the Green takes seriously its responsibility as custodian of one of New England's and New Haven's historic landmarks, and a priceless legacy from our forebears in faith.

Symbolism

We are accustomed to looking for symbols in our religious buildings. The medieval church used stained glass, statuary, and decoration to interpret Bible stories and the lives of the saints to a largely illiterate population. Because the Reform movement assumed the priesthood of all believers and asserted the primacy of the Written Word, believers were assumed to be literate and to be responsible for understanding the Written Word through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, without priestly or saintly intercession. The early reformed meetinghouses were stripped of ornament.

That is not to say that they were stripped of symbolism. The structure of the meetinghouse is itself symbolic. You enter through a large door, and a wide aisle takes you directly to the pulpit at the front of the audience room. The pulpit faces out, toward the people, and a large open bible is placed there by a member of the congregation at the start of every service of worship. From the pulpit, the preacher reads and teaches about the Written Word, which tells believers to go out and to be God's hands and feet in the world. The large windows are of clear glass, open to the world outside, encouraging appreciation of the creation. Today the sounds of the city form a backdrop to every worship service – buses, sirens, horns honking, amplified music – all reminding us that we are in the world, not in a sanctuary from it.

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