

Sometimes the Hartford Unitarian Meeting House looks like an opening lotus blossom in a green pond. Covered with snow, maybe it's a futuristic igloo. The distinctive building, which marks its 50th anniversary this year, is one of the landmark religious works by Modernist architect Victor Lundy, now in his tenth decade.

Having nearly outgrown its 250-seat meeting house in downtown Hartford, CT, by the late 1950s, the

Unitarian Society of Hartford adopted a long-range plan to move out toward suburban West Hartford. In April 1961 Lundy was chosen to design the new meeting house in an open meadow on Bloomfield Avenue at the northwest edge of the city. By that time, Lundy was making a name for himself for boundary-pushing church design. A drive-in church in Florida was completed in the early 1950s, followed by Lutheran and Presbyterian churches in Sarasota. His First Unitarian Church of Fairfield County in Westport, CT, won a P/A Award in 1960.

Hartford Unitarian pastor Reverend Payson Miller reportedly told Lundy that the new church should be a something that "... came up out of the ground and represented the human belief that all religions

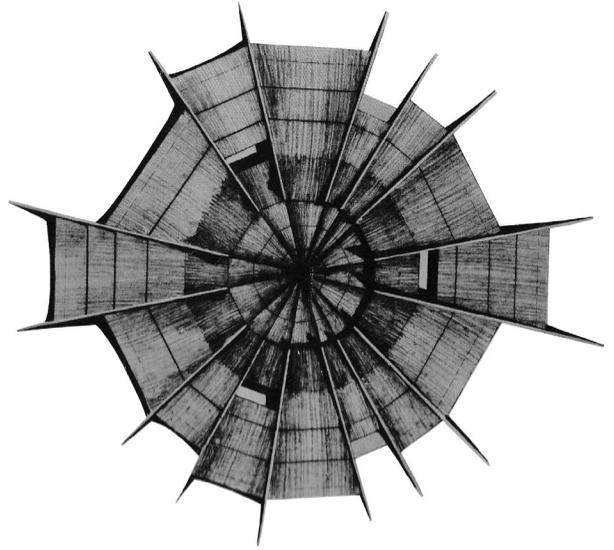
## LIKE A TENT: Victor Lundy's Hartford Unitarian Meeting House



*Hartford Unitarian Meeting House, Victor Lundy, 1962–1964, Hartford, CT. Photo: © G.E. Kidder Smith/CORBIS*

are but so many paths to a single, all-pervading reality”—a bedrock Unitarian tenet. In an article in *Architectural Record's* February 1962 issue on new projects by Lundy, the architect described the design as expressing the concept that "...many points of view draw together and become united in the center," with numerous paths to spirituality. Lundy's design parti for the church is straightforward: A sanctuary at the very center of the plan, capable of holding 350, is encircled by an ambulatory providing circulation for all the support spaces—offices, meeting rooms, a chapel—arranged around its periphery. This outer layer of program spaces is divided by concrete fin walls that radiate from the center, but do not intrude upon the sanctuary.

The main entry is between two walls that open to the southwest; another two entrances are framed by walls to the north and to the southeast. The placement of the walls is staggered, creating generous portions between for meeting spaces and offices. A day-chapel at the back of the church, on axis with but concealed from the sanctuary, looks into a nearby woods. The 12 concrete fin walls start low along the outer edges and then rise to spires at the center in segmented angles that become steeper as

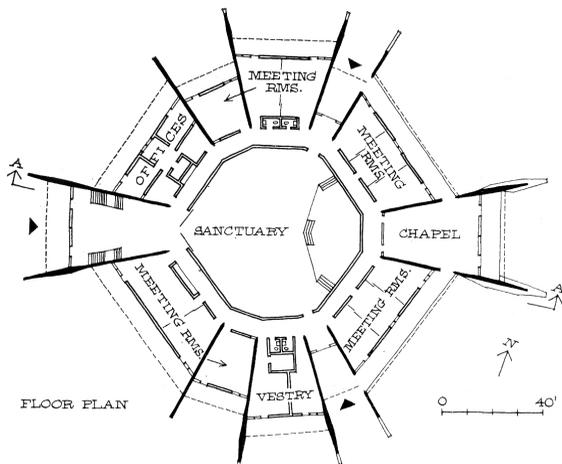


*Preliminary roof plan reproduced on jacket of Architectural Design Preview, USA, John Morris Dixon, editor, 1962.*

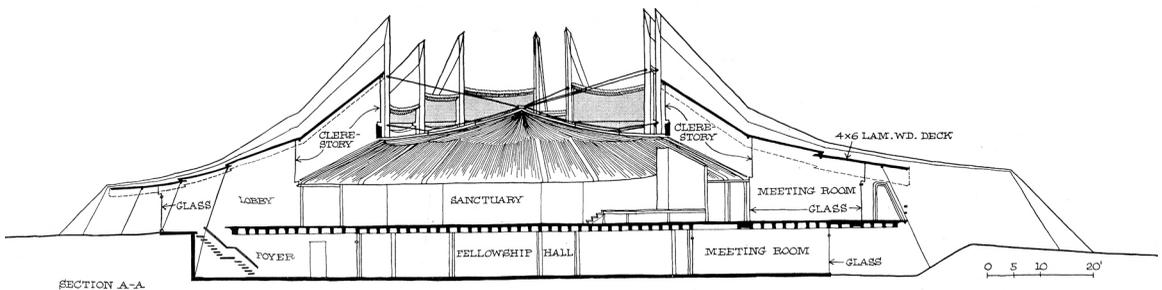
they rise. Segmented roofs spanning between these walls are constructed of wood decking supported by 2-inch-diameter steel cables that gently drape from one wall to the next. (Lundy had used cables in the late 1950s to support a bowed, A-frame-type roof at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Sarasota.) The concrete walls reach their apexes just outside the



*The meeting house in 1964 as construction was nearing completion. Photo: George Cserna Photographs and Papers, Dept. of Drawings & Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.*



Lundy presented his design to the congregation in June 1962, and not everyone was pleased. Several members objected to a building that looked like anything but a church. There was also concern about the roof and its cable supports. The expressive roof forms and the cables were a point of pride for Lundy. After all, provocative roofs were part of his signature style. A June 1957 article in *Architectural Forum*, "The Lively Roofs of Victor Lundy," had focused on just this aspect of his work across a number of building types. Soaring pinnacles, Gothic-inspired profiles, generous overhangs, reverse-slope gables—Lundy's roofs were notably



Floor plan and cross section. Reprinted from *Architectural Forum*, August-September 1964, pp. 128–129.

sanctuary's inner partition, and here Lundy does the unexpected. He creates another roof over the sanctuary, dropped in height below the concrete walls.

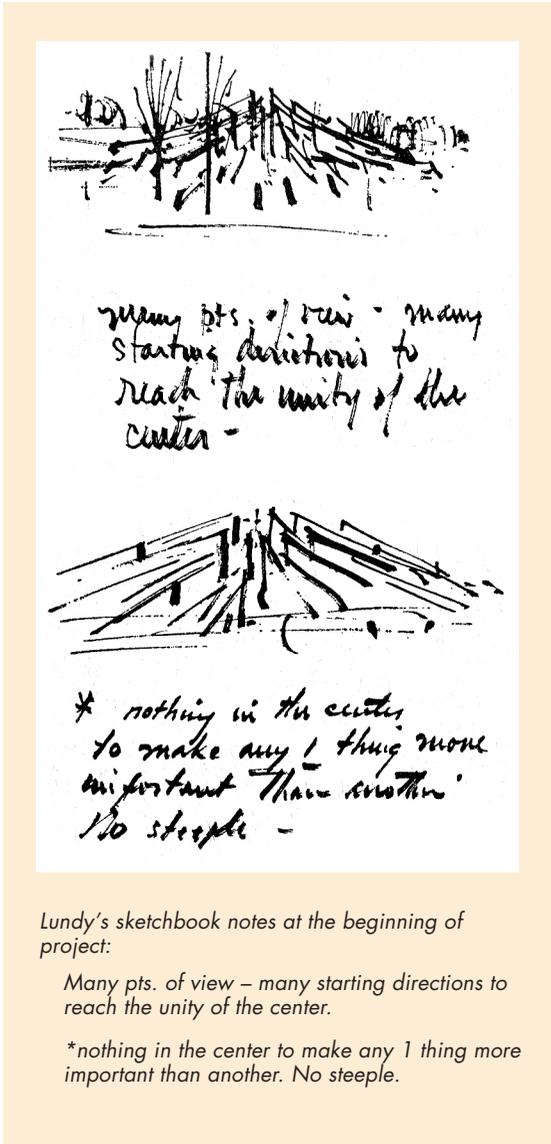
One might expect that the full height of the walls could be read from inside the sanctuary in a climax of space (as one finds in a Gothic cathedral at the crossing of the nave and the transepts). But here Lundy alludes to a much older sacred typology: the tent. In the sanctuary, the cedar-slat ceiling is made up of thousands of pieces that gently angle up, looking as flexible as a textile. At the very center, they disappear into an apex where one might expect to find a tent-pole. The secret of the sanctuary roof is that it is suspended from an upper roof deck that hangs from steel cables supported from the tips of the concrete walls. From inside the sanctuary, the ceiling creates an intimate worship space and appears to float. To complete the tent allusion, it actually sways in a stiff wind, transmitting the gentle movement of the supporting cables.

inventive even for a period when roof design was pushing the envelope. This facility for expressive roof design also made Lundy a natural for designing religious buildings, which in the postwar period saw more experimentation with single volumes enclosed by an all-encompassing roof. The classic A-frame churches of the 1950s are the architectural clichés of this approach.

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The Hartford Unitarians' apprehensions about the roof and its structure were prescient. Almost immediately after the dedication in December 1964, the roof began to disappoint. The architect had specified that the roof sections be covered with wood shingles. Leaks led to remedial efforts (according to a history of the building written by W. Robert Chapman), which included the installation of an

adhered rubber membrane roof in 1970 (it didn't work), followed by a loose-laid, single-ply rubber membrane (also a failure). In 1984 local architect Roy Cook designed a single-ply EPDM roof loosely laid over the wooden structure. Subsequent repairs have been made to the roof over the intervening years. According to building and grounds committee member Stewart Spencer, the roof is an ongoing problem, primarily because Lundy designed it to move with the wind-induced sway of the cables—an invitation to water infiltration. Lack of insulation in the walls and roof, along with single-pane glass, contributes to a building that is often too cold or too hot. A recently upgraded HVAC system, according to Spencer, has helped alleviate some of the discomfort.



Lundy's sketchbook notes at the beginning of project:

Many pts. of view – many starting directions to reach the unity of the center.

\*nothing in the center to make any 1 thing more important than another. No steeple.

Reprinted from Architectural Record, February 1962, p. 120.

A native of New York City, Lundy studied architecture under Walter Gropius at Harvard (classmates included Paul Rudolph and Edward Larrabee Barnes). After practicing in Florida for a few years, he moved his office to New York (he also had one in Guilford, CT), and then headed to Houston in 1980. In 2013 he celebrated his 90th birthday, and the General Services Administration prepared a documentary on his work, with a particular focus on his 1976 U.S. Tax Court Building in Washington, D.C. But Lundy is best known for his churches, through which he explored the expressive power of form, expansive space, and daring structural technology.

—MICHAEL J. CROSBIE