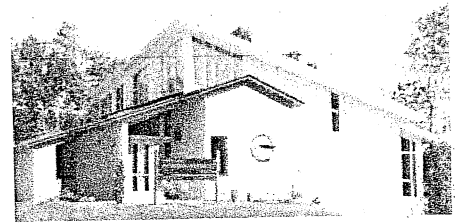


**CHAMPLAIN VALLEY UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY**

**2 Duane Court**

Gossens Bachman Architects (Montpelier), 2009



This newest building on the circuit of the houses of worship belongs to what is also one of the youngest congregations in Middlebury, though they are not without earlier local connections. In the nineteenth century, while Burlington was a stronghold of Unitarianism, there were no Unitarian churches in Addison County. There were, however, Universalists in Shoreham, who built an academy on the Shoreham green in 1810, with a meeting room in it, and in 1885 commissioned a brick church from Middlebury's Clinton Smith. When they passed from the scene, their church became a Grange Hall and is now the property of the Shoreham Historical Society. In Middlebury in 1845 the Universalists built a church in East Middlebury that they turned over to the Methodists in 1874. In 1961 the Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged, and a small group met in the Middlebury Community House until 1969. The present Society, though, was not established until 1986.

As with most of the religious groups in town, they occupied a variety of venues before building their present home. They met at first in homes in Weybridge and Cornwall. Then public services began with visiting ministers and lay speakers in the Sarah Partridge Library in East Middlebury, followed by the Cornwall Town Hall in 1989. Thirty-nine members strong in 1994, they established themselves in the core of the village by purchasing the former home of the Jehovah's Witnesses at the corner of Cross and Water Streets. In 2001 the Rev. Johanna Nichols arrived as the first, permanent, full-time Unitarian Universalist minister in Addison County. Under her ministry the congregation grew to the point that they had to initiate two services, and by 2004 they voted to hire an architect to design a new building (ultimately not pursued) for the restrictive Cross Street site. A generous lead gift in 2007 from Abbott Fenn (long-time Middlebury resident, co-owner of Camp Keewaydin on Lake Dunmore from 1945-1982, and dedicated environmentalist) permitted them to purchase property on Charles Avenue at Duane Court, to renovate the house next door (now named for Fenn) for religious education and office use, and to begin planning for the construction of a new sanctuary.

The planning was an inclusive several-year process, pursued without any obvious prototypes to follow. It grew from a flexible program that would permit multiple uses for many of the spaces and that would take maximum advantage of the site in terms of topography and orientation. The congregants were invited to submit their ideas through such means as a model-building evening before architects were hired. Among the consideration in choosing the architects was that they not have an extensive record of church design and thus not come with pre-conceptions. They did come, though, with a reputation for creative problem-solving, a collaborative design process, community-building, and sensitivity to the environment.

The resulting building reflects contemporary concerns in church construction, specific patterns

and values of the Unitarian Universalists, and local conditions. Set into the hillside site, it is readily accessible on its main level and on a partially exposed, walk-out lower level. Whereas the older buildings in this walk have adjusted over time to be able to accommodate social, educational, and cultural uses beyond the demands of their services, this is a facility designed to do so from the start. A foyer with a sound-absorbing ceiling gives onto a cloakroom, service area, and nursery. It opens via a glazed wall into a broad, flexibly arranged auditorium seating up to 300 and suited to a variety of church and community uses. The south-sloping shed roof focuses attention on a slightly elevated platform suitable for speakers, panels, and also for some performance. Emulating old New England protestant traditions of simplicity, the sanctuary has been left undecorated by such things as stained glass, stenciling, and applied art work, though two metal chalice symbols by member David Durgin are mounted on the outside west wall and in the foyer. Eschewing the traditional organ, the sanctuary is designed acoustically for piano, its ceiling an asymmetrical play of skylights and variously textured acoustic panels. Much of the illumination comes from the skylights and rear clerestory windows, creating a meditative sense of enclosure, balanced by focused views out to the landscape through tall banks of corner windows. Furnishings are removable chairs and a handsome pulpit built by Nick Artim. The lower level, as yet unfinished, will provide a large fellowship hall and congregational kitchen, with additional space for a meeting room/library and bathrooms with a shower to be able to serve the community as an additional emergency shelter, social space, and kitchen.

This is a “green” building designed to be in keeping with the Unitarian Universalist principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” The location was chosen to encourage walking or biking to church within the village. The siting and massing were determined to permit the use of passive solar warming on the ground floor and the possibility of adding photo-voltaic panels on the roof. The envelope is highly insulated, warmed between November and March by a wood-pellet boiler and on-demand water heater, and ventilated by windows designed for natural air flow, ceiling fans, and a heat exchanger to provide year-round fresh air. Materials include 75% recycled steel, low-maintenance fiber-cement siding, and local maple and slate floors. The northern-oriented clerestory windows and light surfaces provide even, glare-free daytime lighting, with fluorescent lighting designed to meet a variety of evening uses of the space.