

St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission
Remarks from Councilmember Melvin Carter III
Tuesday, May 7, 2013

Unity Church-Unitarian, adjacent to the Hill Historic District, is a 48,000 square foot facility at 733 Portland Avenue. It is comprised of multiple structures built over time. The original church dates to 1905, with a parish hall added in 1920, an education wing in 1956, and enclosed cloister in 1963, and an expansion of the education wing in 1988. This type of accretion often leads to complicated building circulation and the diminution of the original structure. And as with all aging structures, scheduled repairs needed attention.

Unity Church-Unitarian, a vibrant community-oriented congregation, found itself at a crossroads. Would it be preferable to remain in its present location or to seek out a new site altogether? This question led to numerous discussions and long range visioning. Fortunately, in consultation with Miller Dunwiddie Architecture, the community decided to stay.

Several significant sets of issues confronted the church, however. The 1963 cloister had closed off the original Portland Avenue entry, creating an exterior wall which was a formidable barrier to the neighborhood and conveyed the wrong impression. Two, the labyrinth of corridors, with multiple entry points and bottlenecks, made movement from one part of the facility to others difficult to navigate; accessibility was also a challenge. And three, because the church is committed to environmental sustainability, the work needed to reflect and support those values, including thermal, mechanical, and daylighting improvements.

In reopening the corner of Portland and Grotto, the original church and parish hall have regained their former prominence, signaling a clear and inviting main entry. The courtyard metaphorically opens its arms to the community that the church seeks to serve, providing a park-like setting for conversation and contemplation. Interior and exterior spaces are more naturally connected. With a Masterplan in hand for ongoing phased improvements, the congregation can now look to the future with confidence, even as needs, activities, and ministries evolve over time. An Organization Award goes:
TO: Unity Church-Unitarian
IN RECOGNITION OF: their leadership in completing a long-range Master Plan for the historic church to remain a community asset while incorporating sustainable and spiritual values into the design