

What do humanists value?

This lesson would ideally come at the end of a unit on humanism, or it could be used as a project during such a unit. It requires that students already have some understanding of humanist beliefs and values.

Starter

Hand out the [What humanists value sheet of quotes](#). Ask the children to create a mind map of what humanists value. Using what they have already learnt about humanism, can they add anything else?

Introduction

Explain that humanists have no special places of worship. Many take pleasure in the wonders of the natural world, and believe contemplating nature can also help us to recognise our place within it. Many have great admiration for the many spectacular achievements of human engineering and architecture that can be found all around the world (including many religious buildings). Show some examples on the slide (Natural History Museum, Houses of Parliament, Sydney Opera House, Griffith Observatory).

Many humanists also value libraries, schools, colleges, hospitals, museums, sports facilities, council buildings, and parliamentary buildings as places of public value. Show the examples on the [slide](#). Ask the students why humanists might value these particular buildings. Explain that these buildings bring people together to lead happy and healthy lives, to support each other, or to work for the common good. All of these are activities and goals that humanists believe we should pursue.

Activity

Ask: If a group of humanists had the funds to design and build a building that represented humanist values, what might that building be like? What might it have in common with, and how might it differ from, religious buildings such as a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple?

Challenge the students to take it in turns to pick words from the [Words connected with things humanists value](#). Ask them to explain how that value could be symbolised in a building? (E.g. Freedom could be represented by an absence of walls between rooms, democracy could be represented by a central room to which all others have access, and curiosity could be represented by windows onto the surrounding environment.)

Ask the students some of the following questions and open them to discussion:

- 1) Should a humanist building hug the Earth or reach for the stars?
- 2) Should a humanist building focus more on humanity or the natural world?
- 3) Should a humanist building reflect individual freedom or our connections with other humans?
- 4) Should a humanist building fit with the surroundings or stand in contrast to them? Does it depend on what the surroundings are (e.g. urban or natural)?

Show the [quotes from the architects](#) about humanist architecture and discuss some of the ideas.

Challenge the students to design and draw a blueprint of their humanist building. Give them some options for the building's function (e.g. a school, library, museum, community centre, crematorium) or allow them to choose their own. These designs could be turned into a class display. Or, if you have the time and resources, the students could even build a model of their building.

Ask the students to think about their answers to the questions above and also consider...

- a) Location: Where would it be?
- b) Exterior: What would the outside look like? What is the relationship between the inside and the outside? Should the exterior say something about the purpose of the building? How should the building be accessed?
- c) Interior: How would the rooms be organised inside and how might they be decorated?
- d) Other features: What else would there be inside and outside the building? Would there be any words, images, or symbols?
- e) Activities: What would the building be used for?

Explain to the students that their designs must include at least five features that represent things that humanists value and they must be able to explain how their buildings represent these values.

Plenary

Ask the students to present their designs to the rest of the class. Challenge the class to spot some of the things humanists value in each other's buildings, then ask the students to explain how their building represents some of the things that humanists value.

Words connected with things that humanists value

One life	Happiness	Friendship
Community	Humanity	Progress
Empathy	Science	The arts
Creativity	Freedom	Optimism
Curiosity	Evidence	Reason
Uncertainty	Democracy	Human rights
Social justice	Equality	The natural world
Human talents and capabilities	Human achievements	Making our lives meaningful

Architects' thoughts on humanist buildings (1)

No buildings have been constructed to date that were designed with the specific purpose of representing humanist values. So the opportunity is there to set the standard for what a humanist building might look and feel like. In architecture there is no right or wrong, only opportunities to explore how an idea can be represented in a building.

The humanist idea of making the most of the one life that we have is brought together by providing freedom, looking after the environment, and exploring it with other people.

The key to designing a truly humanist building could be thinking about how a space feels and connects to the environment around it. Below are a few examples of humanist values and how they might be translated into architecture. I would encourage you to also think of your own ideas for achieving humanist values in a building.

Freedom and care for the environment

A sense of freedom in a room can be achieved through lots of views of the outside and bright, natural light, so large windows with good views from them are important. This has the added benefit of connecting the inside with the outside. If the view is onto a beautiful garden with trees and wild flowers, then people can appreciate their links to the natural world and the importance of caring for it.

Connections with other human beings

Openness between rooms can help people using the building to feel connected with other people both inside and outside. This could be achieved by replacing internal walls with different types of space separations, such as a few steps or low rails. When a wall is needed, a window could be installed with frosted glass, so you can see movement behind and still know there are other people in the building.

Curiosity

Humanists are often curious about the world around them. A space to read and learn, such as a library, could be an important part of a humanist building. Humanists often turn to the stars as an example of something bigger than themselves and are curious about what is out there. Therefore, windows in the roof to view the stars from, or a roof terrace for stargazing, could be a good way of providing a link between the Earth and the stars.

Hannah Flory, humanist and architect in training

Architects' thoughts on humanist buildings (2)

Making a home in this world

Historically, architecture has taken its basic forms from the size of the human body. It started with early shelters of wood, animal skin, or stone, and ended up with the modern home and those other buildings needed to keep people secure, sheltered, and close to each other in neighbourhoods. A humanist approach to architecture focuses closely on this personal, human scale. This is in contrast to the architecture of the pyramids, for example, or grand palaces, monumental churches or corporate skyscrapers, which cast shadows across the humans below and make them appear insignificant. Humanist architecture celebrates everyday life on Earth, while these other, more grandiose forms suggest powers beyond human understanding.

In the 20th century, this 'social architecture' (another way of describing humanist architecture) was closely associated with the arrival of democracy and the rise of the welfare state. This brought about a whole new range of buildings that we now take for granted, including schools, clinics and health centres, hospitals, social housing, public libraries, museums, parks and leisure facilities, and, most recently, hospices for the terminally ill. For the most part, the services these buildings provide have been free to users, whether rich or poor, as part of the modern social contract.

What this kind of architecture shared was a belief in the power of community, of public amenities and services that supported and celebrated the values of a pleasant and secure daily life. These buildings were traditionally low rise, and (if well planned) provided a clear shape and meaning to the neighbourhood. They emphasised the street-level experience of place rather than the posturing of a towering vertical skyline.

In a more individualistic society such as we have today, this ideal of a social architecture is threatened. A wider inequality of incomes and lifestyles tends to produce a greater reluctance to pay taxes necessary to fund such buildings and ways of life. But others are aware of the dangers of ignoring the value of community and dividing towns and cities by wealth or ethnicity. A humanist approach to architecture and town planning still has much to offer.

Ken Worpole, humanist and architect

Humanist buildings



Canada Water Library

Rooted in the ground but opening up to ambitious possibilities?



Telford Crematorium

The glass wall in the main assembly room allows mourners to gaze out at the surrounding natural landscape, to take comfort from it, and to feel at one with it.



Designs for a humanist retreat

Hannah Flory, Chris Gaunt and John Cox, University of Liverpool.



Design a humanist building

Humanists have no special places of worship. Many take great pleasure in the wonders of the natural world, and believe thinking about nature can also help us to recognise our place in the world. Many also have great admiration for the many spectacular achievements of human engineering and architecture that can be found all around the world. Many humanists also value libraries, schools, colleges, hospitals, museums, sports facilities, council buildings, and parliamentary buildings as places of public value. These buildings bring people together to lead happy and healthy lives, to support each other, or to work for the common good. All of these are activities and goals that many humanists believe we should pursue.

If you were to design and build a building that represented things that humanists value, what might that building be like?

What might it have in common with, and how might it differ from, religious buildings such as a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple?

Some questions to think about:

- 1) Should a humanist building hug the Earth or reach for the stars?
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Design and draw a blueprint for a humanist building.

Consider...

- a) Location: Where would it be?
- b) Exterior: What would the outside look like? What is the relationship between the inside and the outside? Should the exterior say something about the purpose of the building? How should the building be accessed?
- c) Interior: How would the rooms be organised inside and how might they be decorated?
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Words connected with things that humanists value:

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Empathy
Creativity
Curiosity
Uncertainty
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Happiness
Humanity
Science
Freedom
Evidence
Democracy
Equality
Human achievements

Friendship
Progress
The arts
Optimism
Reason
Human rights
The natural world
Making our lives meaningful