



June 23, 2011

**Remarks for Building Dedication**  
**John Barr**

Thank you, Don Marshall, and welcome, friends. We are so excited you are here to share the emerging joy of this building, this newest addition to the thriving cultural life of the City of Chicago.

From Don's remarks we heard how the vision for this building reaches back a century into the history of Chicago, to the origins of *Poetry* magazine and to its founder Harriet Monroe. There is also a second woman—really a second founder—whose philanthropy has made possible our gathering here today. Ruth Lilly, in bestowing on poetry a significant portion of her personal wealth, has enabled the Poetry Foundation to carry forward Harriet Monroe's vision in a greatly expanded manner. The Foundation, whose mission commits it to a more vigorous presence for poetry in our culture, has pursued this through a family of new programs, none of which existed seven years ago. Our twofold aim is to discover and celebrate the best poetry, and to place that poetry before the largest possible audience.

The Foundation website, which has already received more than 4 million unique visits this year, is built around an archive of 10,000 classical and contemporary poems. One can think of it as a multi-volume Oxford anthology, free for the downloading. Poetry Out Loud, the national high school recitation contest, has in its six-year history attracted over a million students to compete from thousands of high schools. This year's national champion, 16 year-old Youseff Biaz, found himself transported from Auburn High School in Alabama to the White House, where he recently recited for the President. Because today's youth will become tomorrow's generations of poetry lovers, the Foundation has created the Children's Poet Laureate. The poets so honored, in writing their verse for the very young,

have raised awareness that youth really is the future of poetry. Another Foundation initiative, the Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute, is an Aspen-style think tank that addresses issues of special importance to poetry. Its latest book of practical advice to poets has had over 10,000 downloads. In addition to its own in-house programs, the Foundation is proud to sponsor Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac* as well as *The News Hour* and other media programs that bring good poems to the general reader. Before the Lilly gift the outreach of the Foundation was limited to the circulation of the magazine, which in those days was less than 10,000. Last year the Foundation's programs taken together brought poems to almost 20 million people who would not otherwise have heard or seen them.

Which brings us back to this building. As the last of the initiatives set forth in the Foundation's strategic plan, this project has been six years in the making. In the words of a folk song, it "puts all of the baby into the cradle." A home for the magazine and the Foundation. A home for the events of others who publish or perform poetry in Chicago. A reading place for poetry lovers, with 30,000 volumes within easy reach. A listening place as well, in this room designed to be acoustically perfect for the human voice reciting poetry. We have not yet even moved into the building, and already our programs pulse with a fresh energy. In ways that we don't yet know, we can feel the building changing the ways the Foundation will bring poetry to new audiences.

I said "six years," and it has been a labor of love, with equal emphasis on "labor" and "love." About the craft of writing the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote:

A line will take us hours maybe,  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought  
Our stitching and unstitching has been nought.

The simple yet imposing lines of this building do not betray the years of stitching and unstitching by its architect, its builders, and by our Board and staff. In fact the governing metaphor of this project has been to create a building that works its magic the way a poem does. As a poem reveals itself not all at once, but one line at a time, so the building reveals itself one view at a time. And as the lines of a poem engage and comment upon one another, so do the lines of sight within this building. And as a poem retains

a freshness and mystery that keep the reader coming back, so this building will reward the returning visitor.