Catholic Architecture: The Marriage of Tradition and Modernity

Honors Senior Thesis Creative Project
By: Maria Suzanne Prudlow
December 11, 2006
Advisor: Professor Robert Fisher
Catholic Architecture: The Marriage of Tradition and Modernity

Honors Senior Thesis Creative Project
By: Maria Suzanne Prudlow
December 11, 2006
Advisor: Professor Robert Fisher
Catholic Architecture: The Marriage of Tradition and Modernity

Project Goals and Objectives

Abstract

In the past few years, there has been a growing concern in the Catholic Community, especially in the United States, about the secularization of Catholic Churches. Many churches built since the 1960's were designed with a secular modern architecture tradition rather than with traditional church design passed down from the Roman and Byzantine empires. There has been an outcry that modern churches do not inspire the wonder and awe and reverence for God that the traditional ornamented Churches of the past evoked. At the same time, there are many who argue that the churches descendent of the Roman and Byzantine empires do not speak to the present generation any longer. This thesis project is a design of a Catholic Church in downtown Muncie, Indiana, that will bridge this gap between the traditions of the past and modern insights of Catholic architecture. I will create a church that is a balance between modernity and tradition that will create an appropriate atmosphere of worship for modern Catholics. I have included an analysis of the project's issues, my position on these issues, and various exhibits to display my design for the church, including building plans, sections, elevations, perspectives, and diagrams.

Acknowledgements

-I would first like to thank my advisor, Professor Bob Fisher, who guided me through the processes of designing this building. He helped tremendously in making sure that I thought about all of the issues in the design, from conceptual to design development.

-I would like to thank Professor Jeff Culp, for his advice in the design of the mechanical heating and cooling system of the building. He did a wonderful job of explaining all of the options available and the best solution to my problem.

-I would like to thank Professor Emeritus Tony Costello, for his critique of my project. He gave me some insights into the project that I would never have thought of.

-I would like to thank Father John Kiefer, for his critique of my building, and his advice in helping me to create a space that would encourage spirituality, and truly reflect the truths taught by the Catholic Church.

-I would like to thank Zach Benedict, a graduate of Ball State's College of Architecture, for his critique of my project in the beginning stages, which helped me to form important elements in my design.

-I would like to thank Andy Mitchell, a graduate of Ball State's College of Architecture, for his critiques both in the beginning stages of
my project and at it’s completion. He helped me to think about issues that I had not previously thought of, as well as help me to learn from my mistakes after the project was completed.

The Design of a Catholic Church in Muncie, Indiana

The Catholic Church has been one of the greatest patronesses of the arts throughout time. Jesus Christ, his mother Mary, and the saints have inspired more art and architecture in the Western world than any other group of individuals. It is in this tradition of excellence in the design and creation of beauty that I would like to continue with for the design of a Catholic Church in Muncie, Indiana.

Thesis Topic: Issues and Positions

In the past few years, there has been a growing concern in the Catholic Community, especially in the United States, about the secularization of Catholic Churches. Many churches built since the 1960’s were designed with a secular modern architecture tradition rather than with traditional church design passed down from the Roman and Byzantine empires. There has been an outcry that modern churches do not inspire the wonder and awe and reverence for God that the traditional ornamented Churches of the past evoked. At the same time, there are many who argue that the churches descendent of the Roman and Byzantine empires do not speak to the present generation any longer. Since the 1960’s, the world has changed drastically, with exponential technological progress, an increase in public education, an increase in globalization, and a significant increase in atheism and agnosticism. The Church has had to react to these changes, making sure to lead the faithful to the same truth, but in different ways that respond to the changes in the way modern men and women think.

Equally important concerns are that modern buildings do not allow the Catholic faithful to participate fully and actively in the ritual celebrations. Poor acoustic design has contributed to a loss of singing on the part of the congregation. Architectural and symbolic relationships between important pieces of the building have been lost, as many modern churches have, for example, placed tabernacles outside of the main sanctuary, or de-emphasized the importance of the baptismal font. Historically, these pieces were placed in strategic locations to symbolize truths about the Christian faith. With new locations and modern expressions of these pieces, many of the symbolic relationships have been lost.

My Background for the Design Inquiry

As a Catholic that is personally passionate about my faith, I, too, am concerned about the secularization of Church buildings, and just as equally about the prospect of a return to churches that imitate ancient Roman and Byzantine Churches. I feel that there must be a balance, where Catholic architecture can both respect the rich tradition and history that has become so much a part of Catholic culture, and at the same time produce new churches that relate to modern Catholics and our new way of viewing the world. Additionally, the Church building must create an environment for full and active participation in the Mass. This is what I propose to do in my architectural thesis, the design of a Catholic Church in Muncie, Indiana.

Project Description

I believe that Catholic architecture should be sensitive to the tradition and history of the Church, and incorporate aspects of this tradition that are still pertinent to today. However, the architecture should also convey sensitivity to the needs of the people in present times. In order to do this, the building must relate to local culture. It should also use symbols and images that connect Catholics to their sacred Tradition and at the same time, create new images and symbols that relate to modern men and women. The architecture should be beautiful and well detailed, inspiring wonder and awe of God; a place where people can encounter the divine.
However, this detail should not call attention to itself, but be directed to the purpose of drawing attention to the ritual sacrifice of the Mass and to truths that are being expressed.

Second, the Church building should allow the best possible experience for all participants in the Mass. The architecture should set up and emphasize relationships of pieces of the building that convey truths. It should use symbols and images selectively, that also convey truths and help the congregation to feel wonder and awe and inspire in them a reverence for God. The acoustics should be well designed for full musical participation, and the seating should be arranged so that all can see well what happens during the Mass. The architecture should also produce an awareness of changes in the liturgical year, and the connection between daily living and the mystery celebrated at Mass, producing in the congregation an understanding of the holistic Christian life.

Context: Physical and Cultural

The Catholic Church will be located in Muncie, Indiana, on the Southeast corner of Walnut and Charles Streets. Walnut Street is the main retail and commercial district in downtown Muncie. The urban setting of this church will allow for excellent exposure to the community as a means of evangelization. Also, the Church will have within it various charities such as homeless refuge, a soup kitchen, a library, and community meeting spaces that are well suited to an area of low-income families and the center for culture and activity. The Church building will also take into account the ethnic and religious culture of the area. It is estimated that most of the congregation will be of Caucasian descent, with a growing population of Hispanic and Asian parishioners. These groups have devotions and symbols that are specific to their culture that will need to be accounted for in the design. However, the charities of the church will extend to the whole Muncie community, and will therefore take into account the majority of Caucasian and high percentage of African American citizens. The building must also relate to a congregation that is mainly working class, with a high percentage of adults that have a limited education.

Research: Overview and Bibliography

There is a large body of knowledge on the subject of church design, Catholic theology, and case-studies of Catholic architecture. I have pulled my ideas about church design from a variety of sources. These sources are listed below. Additionally, I have visited and studied a variety of churches that I feel will be beneficial in the design. These are also listed below.

Writing Sources:


Case Studies:

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington D.C.

Jubilee Church, Rome, Italy, Richard Meier

Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land, Washington D.C.
Program Requirements for the Catholic Church in Muncie, Indiana

Church: Seating for 375 people
Nave: 4600 sq. ft.
Sanctuary with tabernacle: 1500 sq. ft.
Eucharistic Adoration Chapel: 375 sq. ft.
Altar: 50 sq. ft.
Baptismal Font: 200 sq. ft.
Ambo: 40 sq. ft.
Presider's Chair: 20 sq. ft.
Sacramental Storage: 500 sq. ft.
Vestment's Closet: 100 sq. ft.
Meditation Closet: 70 sq. ft.
Chapels: 100 sq. ft. each
Two Confessionals: 100 sq. ft. each

Musical Space: 400 sq. ft.
Space for instrumentalists: 150 sq. ft.
Grand Piano: 100 sq. ft.
Seating for 15: 150 sq. ft.
Musical Storage: 450 sq. ft.

Narthex: 2000 sq. ft.
Restrooms: 175 sq. ft. each

Four Meeting Rooms: 300 sq. ft. to 500 sq. ft.

Offices:
Two Priest's Offices: 150 sq. ft. each
Secretary's Office: 150 sq. ft.
Music Director's Office: 150 sq. ft.
Parish Life Director's Office: 150 sq. ft.
Liturgy Director's Office: 150 sq. ft.
Storage: 150 sq. ft.
Restrooms: 50 sq. ft.

Parish Hall:
Kitchen: 500 sq. ft.
Pantry/Storage: 375 sq. ft.
Hall/Eating Area: 2000 sq. ft.
Restrooms: 175 sq. ft. each

Five Dormitories: 120 sq. ft. each
Restrooms: 100 sq. ft. women's and 100 sq. ft. men's with one lavatory and one shower each

Library/Bookstore

Library: 200 sq. ft.
Bookstore: 200 sq. ft
Storage: 150 sq. ft.

Meditation Garden
Stations of the Cross: 300 sq. ft.
The design of this Church tried to incorporate traditional elements of Catholic architecture in a modern format. Ideas such as monumentality, procession, and hierarchy were important. Instead of traditional ornamentation, natural elements of light and water were used as ornamentation.

The site is in downtown Muncie, on the southeast corner of Walnut and Charles streets. The site was chosen because it is in the center of the city, and an area of low income that could be served by many charities housed by the church, such as a homeless refuge, a library, and a soup kitchen. There are two existing retail buildings on the northeast corner of the site.

The floor plan is designed in two zones, the church and the office building. The office building houses a library and church offices on the first floor, meeting rooms and mechanical spaces on the basement floor, and dormitories for the homeless or anyone that needs a place of refuge on the second floor. The building reaches out to the community by touching the corner and sidewalk.

Between the church and the offices, a cloister is formed that becomes a meditation garden open to the public, with access off of Walnut Street and the narthex of the church. The meditation garden also features a space for the Stations of the Cross.

The church stands as a separate entity and is separated from the street level on the entry.
sides to provide ample transition space from the street to the different world of the church, a common feature of traditional churches.

The entire Church is raised on a three foot platform, with ramps from the street coming up to it on both the east and west, with the main entrance on the west. This raised platform is part of the hierarchy concept, in which things that are important are raised up and things that are not as important are lowered. Upon entering from the west, the congregation passes through the bell tower, which is symbolic of calling people to worship. This is the first in a series of processional stages.

Next the people enter the narthex, where parishioners can gather before or after Mass. There are two nodes of activity on each side. On the north there is an entrance to the meditation garden, and on the south there are stairs leading down to the basement parish hall and soup kitchen. Directly ahead of the path, there is an entrance to the sanctuary. The congregation passes through the baptismal font, which becomes the entire back wall of the sanctuary. Passing through this feature reminds the people that they are saved by the waters of baptism, which lead to Christ. Christ can be seen hanging on the crucifix directly ahead upon passing through the font.

The baptismal font is a rocky structure, with water cascading down and forming a pool around it for submersion during the Easter season. Nature and natural materials, such as
limestone, water, and light are integral parts of the design.

As the people pass through the nave of the church, directly ahead is another rocky structure, the altar and tabernacle. On top of the rocks, light shines through the form of a cross, with the crucifix shooting through the roof, into the sky to be seen on the exterior. Embedded into the rocks is the tabernacle, which reaches through to the other side of the rocks where the Eucharistic Adoration chapel is located. The altar is raised up on a two foot platform, again for hierarchy reasons, denoting it as the most important part of the space. On either side of the nave are various chapels for private devotions to saints, or for meditation. Behind the rocky tabernacle, there is an adoration chapel, with confessionals on the exterior of it.

Water is also an integral part of the design, and especially with its connection to light. Wells of water lead the people through the various spaces, with it's height and climax at the foot of the crucifix, just above the tabernacle. This, where the highest point of the water is, signifies that the grace and salvation that comes through water in baptism has its origin in Christ. The water flows down from this point around the church, into the baptismal font, where it then cascades down. Light shines through the bottom of the wells through the water producing water shadows on the walls. Water wells are also found on the entry points, surrounding the adoration chapel, the narthex, and in various places in the meditation gar-
den. The water unifies the building, leads the people, and acts as a sort of modern ornamentation.

Light by itself is also an important design feature. The most noticeable element is the giant crevice in the roof, which extends from the bell tower to the crucifix. Light bounces around multiple times inside the two panels, producing diffuse light that falls on the center aisle, which denotes the importance of procession and leads to the cross. Also on the ceiling, small windows are cut just beneath each ceiling panel, which allows light to shine underneath the panels and light up the ceiling. Light is also a powerful element that comes from behind the crucifix on the tabernacle wall. In less important places, light is controlled through a series of horizontal louvers. These louvers block the sun during its high altitude during the summer for cooling, and allow the sun into the space during the cold winter months. These spaces include the narthex, the parish hall, and the office building hallway.

Texture is also used as an element of ornamentation. Places of importance are denoted by a highly textured, rough limestone. These places include the baptismal font, altar, tabernacle wall, and chapels. The other spaces and walls are smooth, to emphasize the difference between the spaces more clearly.

Noise is also an important control in the design, with a variety of noise levels. Places for private prayer, such as the devotion chapels, are con-
trolled to be extremely quiet. More public spaces as the main worship space and narthex, are meant to be louder for more participation.

Overall, this design is meant to be a series of spaces that change in light, water, texture, privacy, width, and height, according to the needs of the programatic space. This building then forms a whole, which inspires the Catholic faithful for worship and prayer.
Physical Model images of exterior form of building

North Elevation