

ES TRADITION BECOMES INNOVATION BECC

Modern Religious Architecture in America

by BARTLETT HAYES

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Acknowledgments

For those who contemplate building a new church, their own needs are of obvious importance. This book is intended to help meet those needs by illustrating how similar elements of different churches have been designed in a variety of ways. Depending on particular situations, some of these ways possess greater aesthetic merit than others. In order to find potentially useful examples, I have had to search beyond my own personal experience. Toward that end, I have been fortunate in having assistance from certain sources, to which I express my thanks.

The Office of the Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art, and Architecture, housed in the Washington, D.C., branch of the American Institute of Architects, has been of inestimable help, for it contains some four thousand color slides of churches built during this century. Indeed, so extensive is that file that I have been persuaded to limit my selection to examples of churches in the United States.

I am also indebted to the literature on church building, particularly to such publications as the periodical *Faith & Form* issued by the Guild for Religious Architecture (now merged with the Interfaith Forum) and *Liturgy*, journal of the Liturgical Conference held over a number of years. The volume *Revolution, Place, and Symbol*, recounting the events of the first International Congress on Religion, Architecture, and the Visual Arts, has been enlightening, as have summaries of subsequent conferences appearing in *Faith & Form*. The book *How to Build a Church* by John E. Morse (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969) has been most informative; also *Focus: Building for Christian Education* by Mildred C. Widber and Scott Turner Ritenour (United Church Press, 1969). *Religious Architecture in America* by Susan Borhardt (St. John's Church, Washington, D.C., 1976) has provided an admirable historical overview of the subject; and I am indebted to the Commission on the Liturgy, Green Bay, Wisconsin, for its pamphlet "Guidelines for the Building and Renovation of Churches." My attention has also been called to a few examples described in *Religious Buildings*, a publication by the editors of the magazine *Architectural Record*, as well as to pertinent articles in individual issues of that periodical. Superbly valuable for the unusually fine quality of its photographic description of architectural detail has been the two-volume *Pictorial History of Architecture in America* by G.E. Kidder-Smith (American Heritage Publishing, 1976), which includes a selection of modern church buildings against which I have weighed my own predilections.

Those who warrant specific mention include Howard E. Spragg, executive vice-president of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries; and John R. Potts, secretary of The Office of Church Building and the Advisory Committee for Church Building of that board. This book results from their confidence in the need for it to be published. I thank them for that confidence. Above all, I am indebted to Betty Meyer who, together with her husband, the Rev. Eugene Meyer, has for many years fostered the role of the arts in the church. As my manuscript has neared completion, Betty, currently editor of the periodical *Faith & Form*, has become a virtual collaborator by gathering illustrations, reviewing the text, and suggesting how to clarify my comments when these have seemed obscure.

Finally, to the many architects, artists, photographers, clergy, members of diverse congregations, personal friends, and others who have helped, I also proffer a bookful of appreciation.

Foreword

Do church structures built during the last two decades evoke a spiritual response in the worshiper? Do they serve the functional needs of their congregations?

Charles Jencks writes in his book *The Language of Post Modern Architecture* that architecture must have a signifying reference. The Renaissance had Platonic metaphysics, the Romans a belief in imperial organization—does our age reflect anything beyond a polite agnosticism? Jencks believes that the spiritual function of architecture remains and that Post-modern architects will crystallize their own spiritual realms around the metaphors at hand. Growing out of the tradition of modernism, these metaphors emerge implicit and mixed, in search of innovative and explicit forms. We exist in a time of unsettled metaphysics, according to Jencks, but architects are committed to exploring multiple levels of meaning and perception.

I am pleased that Bartlett Hayes, long an art educator and curator of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, accepted the invitation to write *Tradition Becomes Innovation*, which I believe will help lay men and women, administrators, clergy, building committees, artists, and architects to understand the learning experience and challenge of building a church. The organization of the book and the carefully chosen photographs lead us through the structure of a church until we recognize tradition becoming innovation and innovation becoming tradition. We begin to learn to see and to “read” a building. We are happy with good design. More importantly, we recognize that the truth of all our faiths will reside in the structures that we build.

Good design knows no poverty. Too often a church committee holds the view that good design is expensive, that an architect cannot be encouraged to think creatively because it will be beyond the budget. But whether the church is to be one small room or a vast cathedral, good design enhances the spiritual atmosphere in which the liturgy can have an inspired meaning.

In short, this book is especially addressed to those who would build a church. Although it is sponsored by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, the selection of churches and other religious structures to serve as illustrations was based on their architectural features rather than the particular faith represented. Therefore, it is hoped that the book may have interest and use for many people.

Howard E. Spragg, *Executive Vice President*
United Church Board for Homeland Ministries

Introduction

An essential argument for the design of a church, or of its related parts, centers upon the aesthetic affinity of the church with the religious will it endeavors to manifest.

One usually recognizes, by its form, that a church is a "house of God." One may also know that it is a house for the "people of God," the congregation. But what one does not necessarily know is what that congregation thinks, nor indeed the inner belief, or faith, of which the church is a symbol. In order to understand what the church building represents, it is therefore as essential for a person to participate in the ritual practiced within as it is for the building to explain itself to anyone who wants to know. Thus, observed as a design, the church structure should not only reward the emotions of the congregation but also excite the wonder of the stranger. Its form and space should somehow reveal the inner function (the spiritual presence of those who participate) as well as the congregation's role in the larger community. That subtle designation of inner and outer essence is what binds a church to the congregation it has been built to shelter. Accordingly, modern churches may be expected to differ from one another as much as congregations do.

Yet another instance of the power of sculpture to communicate spiritual qualities is the golem (136). A religious robot that first appears in medieval Jewish folklore, a golem is endowed with magical life but contrived by human ingenuity. In that respect it supplies moral support to resist oppression. As sculpture, the piece is close to the folk art in which it is rooted. As a modern concept it is both traditional and innovative.

Close to and yet far from folk legend is the Christian account of the crucifixion. In many cases, its representation has become overly sentimental because years of veneration have persuaded followers to seek redemption by adoration. Regarded callously, however, it was a brutal event, as are all acts of violence and torture. This agonized, distorted figure (137) is a humane, powerful protest against suffering, rather than a penitent representation of it.

When considering the universal need for a religious conviction that will provide truly spiritual support, it seems appalling that there have been and still are "holy wars," meaningless violence, among those who choose different methods to express their concepts of divinity.

A passionate plea for reconciliation is, perhaps subconsciously, expressed through the emotions of one artist who has envisaged figures to symbolize similar feelings experienced by two avowedly different faiths.

In a Jewish temple Moses, with arms and voice upraised, reveals the majesty of God to the people (138). In a Catholic sanctuary the supplicant Christ in Glory (139) is conceived by the same artist, in somewhat the same posture, as the divine mediator to reach the congregation on behalf of "the Lord." Each differs according to the two faiths, yet the affinity of the dual ecstasies is explicit.



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