



CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

The trappings of 'Ineffable Space'

By Emily Morrison

"I want to have Sunday to taper off in, so that I can collect the first loose threads of my work on Monday ..." wrote Claude Bragdon, the eminent Rochester architect selected in 1907 to design the landmark First Universalist Church on downtown South Clinton Avenue. In mourning over the recent death of his young wife after childbirth, left with a newborn infant and a 15-month-old son, and steeling himself to embark on the newly assigned commission, Bragdon had chosen the Monday in question as "the date I have set for putting everything off and behind me that might unfit me for the stern struggle ahead."

Most of us have far less monumental or tragic concerns to occupy ourselves with on a Sunday afternoon tapering off into late March, when Canada geese are on the wing, and any remaining snow lies here and there in ragged clumps you can almost imagine crocus heads poking through. In the raised flower beds outside Our Lady of Victory on Pleasant Street, tulips will soon be blooming in the very heart of the central business district, where people from all walks of life stop into the French Renaissance-style sanctuary its pastor, Father James J. King, describes as "a very functional

The tour began with a stop at St. Luke's, the oldest public building still standing in the city of Rochester and an unusually early example of 19th-century Gothic Revival architecture. Constructed in 1824 of "roughly dressed gray limestone from Auburn," as the Landmark Society's impressively researched tour booklet describes it, the building features red Medina sandstone quoins, window and door trim, and watertable. "Although its rectangular plan, pedimented gable front and slightly projecting tower conform to the then popular New England meetinghouse style, its pointed windows, pinnacles and many interior details are of Gothic origin," the program elaborates. "The present wooden tower, which replaced a simpler early tower in 1856, exhibits elegant, high Gothic filigree, pointed gables and delicate finials."

Rector Bruce Hanson cordially welcomed visitors to Rochester's oldest religious congregation, pointing out the decorative, carved wooden canopy and tiered pulpit, reading desk and altar he referred to as "this fantastic arrangement that somebody says looks like wedding cake." Installed between 1836 and 1839, the triple-decker construction is the only one extant in this part of the world, according to

how our ancestors achieved gray-tinted glass. No matter what we do, the replaced panes turn pink."

St. Luke's total enrolled membership of approximately 200 includes about 100 active members. "We have both the oldest and the eldest congregation in Rochester," says the Rev. Hanson with more than a little irony in his tone. "There are not too many of us left down here." If you consider his estimate of Rochester's per capita population of senior citizens as the highest in the nation outside St. Petersburg, Fla., however, the graying of St. Luke's congregation may actually be a point of pride for the venerable edifice.

Onward by bus to the other end of Fitzhugh Street, the tour made its second stop at Downtown United Presbyterian Church, formerly known as Brick Presbyterian Church until its 1973-74 merger with First Presbyterian and Central Presbyterian, two other downtown churches with dwindling urban congregations.

Dr. J. Melvin Butler, organist and choir director, welcomed tour participants to the present church, the third structure that has stood on the downtown site since 1828. By 1860, the church's early congregation had outgrown the first brick church, and a new brick building

with Indiana limestone trim was designed by Andrew Jackson Warner in 1860.

"In 1903, the building was gutted by a fire that began in a lantern factory across the street," Dr. Butler related. "The heat was so intense that the fire spread to the wooden hands of the tower clock." Afterwards, nothing remained but the side walls and the two iron columns that had supported the interior corners of the building.

Plans were immediately drawn up for the church's reconstruction, and Warner's son, architect J. Foster Warner, was commissioned to design a new building. "The two pointed Gothic spires were replaced by two Italianate towers," Dr. Butler continued. "The back and downstairs windows are from the Tiffany studios, all installed in the 1920s ... The church was extensively renovated in 1982, when the Fisk organ was designed and installed at the front of the church, so the choir could remain in front. The organ needed to be placed in a rather prominent position. As you might imagine, it was a controversial decision, to say the least."

The sound of the choir has been immensely improved by changes in the chancel area, according to Dr. Butler, who pointed out that all of the furnishings there — including pulpit, altar, lectern, communion table and carved organ screen — can be removed to provide space for the popular concert series held in the sanctuary. To the rear of the imposing 34-foot organ (the largest mechanical-action organ to be built in western New York during this century) is a large, Venetian glass mosaic of Christ, patterned after the famous painting by Raphael, "The Transfiguration," which hangs in the Vatican Museum in Rome. Once considered too "high" for the Presbyterian Church, the mosaic and a small chapel with a very large marble altar have also been targets of controversy.

Before his visitors embarked again into the chilly late winter afternoon, Dr. Butler presented a 15-minute organ program that featured J.S. Bach's "Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor" and "The Westminster Carillon" by early 20th-century French composer Louis Vierne. The majestic sound seemed to spiral along the broad, circular sweep of the balcony railing and resound against the fiery, opalescent glass of its windows. "Let me say that no matter how hard you try, you won't be able to talk over the organ," Dr. Butler cautioned wryly between musical selections. Appreciative audience members were too carried away to even make the attempt.

By the time the bus pulled up to the massive Romanesque and Italian Lombard-style facade of Salem United Church of Christ, the March air had taken on a decided sting. The refinished pews in the rather somber sanctuary offered no padding, yet the formidable and imposing interior architecture presented an impressive aspect that tourgoers gradually warmed to, as warmth from the church's modernized heating

All of the buildings on this tour have in common location within the Inner Loop, striking and historically significant architecture, and that certain sense of awe and mystery that has characterized many of the greatest religious buildings of the past. Le Corbusier, the herald of modernist architecture, once called that essential quality of religious structures "ineffable space" — a spatial ambience that is difficult to fully understand or grasp.

church — a downtown sanctuary."

On Sunday afternoon, March 16, the Landmark Society offered one in a popular series of thoroughly ecumenical bus tours of "downtown religious treasures." The churches on this particular tour included St. Luke's Episcopal Church at 17 S. Fitzhugh St., Downtown United Presbyterian Church at 121 N. Fitzhugh St., Salem United Church of Christ at 60 Bittern St., Our Lady of Victory St. Joseph's Church at 210 Pleasant St., First Universalist Church at 150 S. Clinton Ave., and the historic First Presbyterian Church (now Central Church of Christ) at 101 S. Plymouth Ave.

All have in common location within the Inner Loop, striking and historically significant architecture, designated historic landmark status or eligibility for it, and that certain sense of awe and mystery that has characterized many of the greatest religious buildings of the past. Le Corbusier, the herald of modernist architecture, once called that essential quality of religious structures "ineffable space" — a spatial ambience that is difficult to fully understand or grasp.

the Rev. Hanson. Traditionally a "low" or more evangelically oriented Episcopal church, St. Luke's at some point made the decision to accommodate an increasing trend toward centralization of the altar area by piling up the different elements in what the rector termed "a marvelous, sectarian bit of Victoriana."

In 1967, the congregation's sesquicentennial year, the chancel was restored to resemble a photograph made of it in 1865 (minus the black draping revealed by the picture, taken at the time of President Lincoln's assassination). "In what was originally here, you have what I perceive as a marvelous tribute to the creativity, the imagination and the skill of our colonial forbears. They were able to give an illusion of grandeur which they could neither afford nor could they have imported, out here into the wilds of western New York," he observed.

The marblelike interior columns and walls were actually painted to simulate pink marble, and the windows are not stained but painted glass, the panes of which are graciously replaced by a local glass company as soon as there's any sign of breakage. "But gratitude has to stop at the skill of modern workmen," the Rev. Hanson points out, "because we don't know



In the center panel of Downtown United Church of Christ's Mosaic Chapel is a Venetian glass mosaic of the Christ figure from Raphael's painting, "The Transfiguration."