

Columbus Indiana: A Symphony in Stone

“It is said that architecture is frozen music, but seldom in history has any group of devoted artists produced such a symphony in stone as presents itself to the eye in Columbus.”
Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson

Participants in the October 2001 Interfaith Forum on Religion Art and Architecture (IFRAA) were treated to such a “symphony in stone” at their conference in Columbus, Indiana. This city of about 39,000 is home to an array of outstanding architecture by both well known and not so well known (yet) architects. The citizens of Columbus approach public architecture with the belief that quality architecture can significantly contribute to the quality of public life: the two are profoundly related. Isn't this one of the operating principles of liturgical consulting? The built environment, that is the place of worship and liturgy, and the act of public worship (the liturgy itself) are intimately interwoven. Winston Churchill was right: “We shape buildings and afterward they shape us.”

Churches make up a significant portion of Columbus' architectural heritage. These sacred spaces are theological statements of the communities who created them and use them today. We visited eight places of worship over two days. Here are some of the lessons from this symphony:

Learn everything you can about the community of faith with whom you work. William Browne of Ratio Architects explained that St. Bartholomew's Roman Catholic Church was the first church the firm had designed. They learned everything they could about Roman Catholicism. The building will be completed in January 2002 but even in the construction stage the form, articulated by light from a variety of directions, speaks of the value of gathering and community. When completed this edifice will be home to two recently merged parishes. More information is available at www.ratioarchitects.com.

“Finished” buildings are actually works in progress” The First Baptist Church, designed by Harry Weese in 1965, and now a designated National Landmark, is located on a hill from which its form gently commands respect and attention and welcomes the stranger. The interior of the sanctuary however seems to fight with the actions of the community at worship 36 years later. The choir is located at the front of the sanctuary behind a two-foot thick brick wall penetrated by large geometric openings. Behind the wall the choir space feels like and

indeed is a separate room from the sanctuary. It continues to be used by the choir during worship. TV monitors in the choir space allow the choir to see worship. To find out what the First Baptist Church community thinks about their worship space go to www.fbccolumbus.org/whoweare.html.

What is appropriate for one community of faith may not be appropriate for another, even within the same faith tradition or denomination. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has at least two places of worship in Columbus. The First Christian Church designed by Eliel Saarinen in 1942, was this architect's first church design. It was also the first building in Columbus to break from traditional architectural styles and one of the first churches built in the international style in the U.S. Both the architect and congregation wanted a building worthy of the denominations roots. In the nineteenth century, the Christian Church grew out of a deep concern for the unity of all Christians on the simple basis of faith in Christ. The theology of this faith community was best expressed not in a style from the past (i.e. neo-gothic) but in a form most expressive of their day and the future. The large rectangular box housing the sanctuary is filled with light and voluminous space. By contrast the North Christian Church designed by Eero Saarinen in 1964 hugs the ground while its huge roof and spire speak of church and invite one to enter this hushed and dimly lit space that embraces the community.

A church can be a “both/and” and need not be an “either/or” solution. St. Peter's Lutheran Church, designed by Gunner Birkets in 1988, does an especially fine job of providing a both/and solution. Through the use of two over-lapping off centered circles the plan allows for an intimate sanctuary within a large auditorium. The form with its curved walls draws the whole congregation together as one body. More information on these last three buildings is available at www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/index/index2.html.

In each of these churches the architect took on the role of the liturgical consultant. In some cases this was appropriate and successful, in others the results are in hindsight questionable. The overall lesson of Columbus is to not make assumptions about what form is best for a particular church but rather to let the community of faith speak through liturgical consultants, architects, and artists, and ultimately through their ways of worship and prayer who they are and what matters. For information on Columbus go to: www.columbus.in.us.

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