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Architecture Always Wins: Part B

- A I continue below my repeat of a favourite Golden Oldie.
- B This one was from October 1999, Essay 33. Originally Part One and Part Two.
- C Neither Part A nor Part B have been available to readers since this website was re-designed.

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1 "We murder to dissect." The thought is from William Wordsworth, the great English Romantic poet, if I am not mistaken. He's reflecting on the price we always pay for information, for knowledge of a thing, how it's built, what it's made of. That frog on the laboratory table. When you're finished taking it apart, dissecting it to know it better, what you end up with is a dead frog -- an ex-frog, you might say, paraphrasing the immortal Monty Python sketch.

2 I thought of Wordsworth's words last month, gentle reader, as I dissected Gothic architecture before your horrified eyes -- perhaps murdering its beauties for you, for all time to come.

3 At its most mean-spirited, my critique of Gothic went like this: "You show me a church building the size and scale and proportions of a European Gothic cathedral -- not excluding the European Gothic cathedrals! -- and I'll show you a) a monument to the ego of the bishop or pastor who built it, and b) a white elephant to succeeding generations of worshippers." (Granted, you might also have on your hands a magnificent cultural monument.)

4 If Gothic buildings -- and "Neo-Gothic" buildings -- according to Bosch, are inadequate for Christian worship, what is adequate? Let's continue our church tour, begun last month, and draw some conclusions.

5 (Have you seen the word spelled "toor"? That's a legitimate, if quirky, rendering, when it's churches you're visiting, according to a church-architect friend...)

6 Recall, before we take up our tour, my chief argument throughout this series: That human beings communicate with more than words. The spaces we inhabit, the postures and gestures we use, the clothing we wear, the artifacts and utensils we employ: each of these "speaks" about our perceptions of ourselves and of our world. Hence, each of these arts, when pressed into service of the Word in Christian worship, necessarily become "words," become themselves bearers of that Word. Media of Meaning.

7 So we ignore the witness of these unspoken "words" to our peril, or at least to our diminishment. These arts-as-voices speak, and speak with persuasive eloquence – whether or not the worship leaders who use them are attuned to what they say.

8 And sometimes these non-verbal voices "speak" with more power and persuasiveness than our verbalizings. And sometimes the word they speak is in contradiction to our verbalizings!

9 A note on terminology: You might wonder, in what follows, why I use quotation marks around the various compass directions, the word "east" or "eastward" as examples. Early church buildings were invariably oriented with the altar in the east, the rising sun a vivid metaphor for Christ. In Mediterranean lands, worshippers thus faced eastward, the location of Jerusalem, and of the eschatological New Jerusalem. Hence a convention arose among church architects that identified the location of the altar as "eastward," in any church building, no matter its actual compass orientation. My quotation marks attempt to honour that convention...

10 Fourth stop on our tour: Marcel Breuer's magnificent Abbey and University Church of Saint John the Baptist in Collegeville, Minnesota. Yes, it's triumphalist in scale: it seats more than 1900 people, if you include the choir-stalls for the monastic community. And because of that monumental size, it needs a public address system. ("If a church needs a PA system," says an architect-friend, "it's too big...") You could arguably excuse cathedrals from this dictum; and in any case, to its credit, the Abbey Church has hidden its PA system unobtrusively in a splendid baldaquin, or canopy, over the altar.

11 The plan of the Abbey Church incorporates both axial and radial elements. You enter the church itself through a separate room housing a large and elegant baptistry. In the nave, "eastward"- facing pews spread out to left and right. Directly ahead is a raised chancel, flanked by a half-circle of choir stalls, facing "westward", for the monastic community. The free-standing altar is designed so as to be used "basilican"- style, the presider facing the people "westward" across the altar during University services, facing "eastward" across it for monastic services.

12 In plan, the Abbey Church recalls the Nineteenth Century "Akron"- style churches of Central Pennsylvania. Douglas Cardinal's lovely Church of St. Mary in Red Deer, Alberta, is a contemporary Canadian equivalent. Their secular counterpart: the "thrust stage" of Stratford, Ontario's Festival Theatre, or of the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

13 Last stop: Eero Saarinen's North Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana. (Columbus, in southern Indiana, is a "must-see" for anyone interested in architecture. It's like no other city in the world, thanks to the foresight of its civic leaders: even its fire-hall and library and public schools have been designed by modern masters.)

14 North Christian Church is, in plan, an elongated hexagon. Tiered platforms at "north" and "south" support ranks of pews facing each other across a raised chancel area, with central altar; and, to the "east", an ambo for reading scripture and preaching, choir stalls, and an organ with pipes.

15 The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), to its credit, is one of the few Protestant denominations that has retained every-Sunday Holy Communion throughout the years, so the central altar is very appropriate.

16 A lovely baptismal pool (for total immersion!) graces a separate space apart from the nave.

17 I was at a loss to find a secular equivalent for this kind of space, until I moved to Canada. A Canadian participant at one of my workshops knew immediately: a parliament chamber!

18 OK: some implications. Long, narrow, axial churches with an elevated "east-wall" chancel pose all-but-insurmountable problems for Christian worship, without significant alteration. If our worship aspires to nurture a) a sense of the priesthood of all believers, b) a sense of community, and c) the active participation of worshippers (See Essay 32, above), then the family dining room (a la Dura Europas) is surely the finest secular model for us to emulate.

19 Of course, any building interior can be altered, some more successfully than others. Following the insights of Vatican II, for example, many European Gothic cathedrals have been altered significantly: The elevated, east-wall "high altar" respectfully ignored (in some cases, the entire chancel ignored, or re-configured into a chapel), a new altar positioned in the "crossing" (where east-west nave and north-south transept intersect), with handsome moveable chairs (not pews!) positioned in nave, in transepts (and in some cases even in chancel) so as to face this new worship centre -- in effect turning an axial space into a radial space.

20 The High Kirk of Scotland, St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, is a breath-taking example of creative and sensitive alteration. And it's Presbyterian, yet!

21 In any church building, the four irreplaceable architectural "signs" should stand forth in utmost clarity: font, ambo, altar, and sedilia (seats for worship leaders). Breuer's Abbey Church and Saarinen's North Christian Church, above, both reveal enormous respect for these ancient and non-negotiable "signs."

22 A bank of microphones, with drum-set, looming speaker boxes, and overhead projector screens, no matter how familiar these may be to moderns, will not be adequate substitutes for these four ancient and irreplaceable "signs" in a Christian house of worship.

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