

P L A C E S O F P R A Y E R

Church Builders

by Edwin Heathcote and Iona Spens.
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Reviewed by Barrie Scardino

In this secular century, religion is difficult to discuss, and, for the same self-conscious reasons, religious architecture has taken a backseat to corporate and institutional projects. Even though renowned architects receive religious commissions (Raphael Moneo is working on Our Lady of Angels Cathedral in Los Angeles, and Frank Gehry entered the competition for the Church of the Year 2000 in Rome), we seem to ignore new church buildings, both large and small, as though to critically judge them would be blasphemous. New titles abound on such crucial building types as cafés and barns, but it has been some time since a serious look at churches has appeared.

Edwin Heathcote and Iona Spens' *Church Builders* is, therefore, as courageous as it is delightful. In their preface, these two English architectural writers acknowledge that we live in an era in which the church's place as part of the community fabric has been challenged. *Church Builders*, they promise, "attempts to take a broad look at some of the symptoms of this questioning,... and the changing nature of sacred space in the Christian world." Heathcote tackles the first issue, and Spens deals with the second, both with engaging success.

Beautifully designed, *Church Builders* is a pleasure to browse through. One in a series published by Academy Editions, the book is organized like its siblings on museums, theaters, libraries, and airports: a background essay precedes descriptions of a series of individual projects. Heathcote's "The Twentieth-Century Church: The Enigma of Sacred Objectivity" provides background in its discussion of the Christian theological and liturgical upheavals of this century, and Spens' lavishly illustrated "Movements of the Spirit" provides an in-depth examination, in this case of the religious work since 1955 of 15 international architects and firms. Spens' section, filled with images of her choosing, is the more personal view of the subject. She eschews familiar churches such as Le Corbusier's Pigrimage Chapel at Ronchamp (1952-55) in favor of fresher and lesser known works, a good decision that exposes the reader to a variety of relatively new church projects that could have been squeezed out by

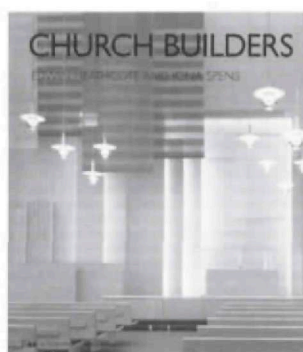
the superstars.

Heathcote begins his essay with an analysis of the late 19th-century debate in England on liturgical form and architectural function. The neogothicists of the Oxford Movement "rediscovered" the Roman sacraments and insisted on traditional Catholic architecture — narthex, nave, choir, and altar. In opposition, more egalitarian Protestants clung to a plainer preaching-house form. But it was the neogothicists whose impact was most obvious; in Europe and America at the turn of the century, grandchildren of the great European cathedrals appeared in large churches and parish chapels.

But as Heathcote notes, before long new technology and modern thought formed by Marx, Freud, and the philosophy of Functionalism brought radical architectural change. Iron, then steel bracing, reinforced concrete, and other engineering advancements gave architects a new vocabulary with which to work at the same time that Modernism gave them a new mind-set. As early as 1908, Adolf Loos wrote that "ornamentation, which arises in such arts as tattooing, belongs to the infancy of the world ... it will disappear from our architectures as it has from our machinery." (p. 14)

Loos appears to have been wrong about tattooing, but about architecture he was correct. In this century, church design has been influenced as much by secular thought as by liturgical reform. For example, German Expressionism as practiced by the Bauhaus and others led in the ecclesiastical realm to a new kind of worship space that allowed for increased participation by congregations. At the same time, new liturgical mandates in both Catholic and Protestant churches gave congregations a more central role both in the service and physically in the worship space. In Catholic and Anglican churches altars were turned, allowing priests to face their parishioners, and church size was reduced, allowing for more intimacy and better acoustics.

Le Corbusier's French Pilgrimage Chapel, according to Heathcote, "is the fundamental turning point of the modern movement; the point at which a kind of expressionism, a sculptural approach to architecture, found its way back into the fold." (p. 46) Since Ronchamp, art, through abstract expressionism, has become a thoughtful part of modern church architecture. The altar, cross, and hundreds of traditional icons and symbols



have filled Christian churches always. But Iona Spens makes clear in "Movement of the Spirit" that light and water, line and form have become increasingly important as

expressions of the sacred.

Spens begins her examination of specific church projects with an astounding acknowledgment: "Even after almost a century of reform the 'modern' churches of today are less readily accepted than their traditional counterparts." (p. 66) Her purpose seems to be to enlighten her readers beyond such a viewpoint. The structures and architects she reviews are innovative, meaningful, and, in some cases, amazing.

In looking at Spens' examples, the reader may draw several conclusions about current church design. Most strikingly, the churches illustrated are generally contextual. In his Mityana Cathedral (1972) in Uganda, Swiss architect Justus Dahinden created a church recognizably inspired by the rounded forms of traditional African huts. In Malta, Richard England built a church at Manikata (1962-74) that is based quite literally on an ancient Maltese megalithic temple.

Tadao Ando's Japanese sensibilities are evident in his Church of the Light (1989) in Osaka, a small double cube of concrete with a cruciform aperture at the front that extends side to side and top to bottom. The building is austere and meditative. The year before he designed the Church of the Light, Ando created the Church on the Water (1988) in Hokkaido. It is likewise a serene and evocative place, where the congregation faces a reflection pool from which rises a steel cross. These churches illustrate abstract expressionist ideas that bring light and water, the great symbols of Christianity, into dominance within a building.

Two Finnish firms, Suomalainen Architects and Siren Architects, have also produced churches filled with light. Siren Architects' Chapel in Otaniemi (1957) is a small woodland chapel built of glass, brick, and wood. A monument to Finnish modernism and ecclesiastical simplicity, it is detailed over eight pages, which include four full-page photos. Such generosity of images gives *Church Builders* both magnificence as a publication and intellectual depth as a history.

As a whole, the projects Spens examines not only give the sense that the architects of new churches pay attention to context and geographical tradition, but

also have set their focus outward, as opposed to the inward-looking focus of traditional churches designed by their predecessors. Also, there is a serious organic aspect to most of these new churches. Many use stone and wood or look to trees and sky. The most bizarre projects illustrated are those of Imre Makovecz, a Hungarian architect who is quite literal in his animal and bird forms. Both his Lutheran Church in Siofok (1990) and his Roman Catholic Church (1991) in Paks are frightening.

In America, Spens examines Fay Jones' Thorncrown Chapel (1981) and Mildred B. Cooper Memorial Chapel (1988), both in Arkansas. These buildings could stand with the well-known churches excluded from *Church Builders*; however, it is satisfying that Spens included them, for the large color pictures and detailed drawings of Jones' innovative projects take one's breath away.

The only other U.S. architect whose work Spens explores is Philip Johnson; his Crystal Cathedral (1980) and its Chapel and Bell Tower (1990) in Garden Grove, California, are the book's centerfold. Johnson's huge Cathedral of Hope in Dallas is scheduled for completion in 2004. In the published design, at least, this windowless project looks like the iceberg that sunk the Titanic.

Let Johnson be seen as the prophet for churches of the 21st century, *Church Builders*' last chapter is an essay on the Vatican-sponsored competition for the Church of the Year 2000 in Rome. The proposals of six entrants are discussed: Tadao Ando, Gunter Behnisch, Santiago Calatrava, Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, and winner Richard Meier. The competition called for a "place of welcome, a place of convocation, a churchly place," and perhaps as a result all of the entries are more or less in the continuum of 20th-century churches that respond to community and to the natural world.

The desire driving the Vatican's search for a modern church seems in direct contrast to Le Corbusier's statement that, at Ronchamp, he wanted "to create a place of silence, of prayer, of peace and of internal joy." Indeed, the question of intent will be the crucial one as worshipers and architects continue to search for architectural solutions to spiritual needs. Many of the innovative projects in *Church Builders* seem able, in spite of complex programs, to provide both a useful gathering place and a space of transcendent serenity — a useful revelation of possibility. ■



Mildred B. Cooper Memorial Chapel, Bella Vista, Arkansas. Fay Jones, 1988. From Heathcote and Spens' *Church Builders*.