

OLD-TIME RELIGION!

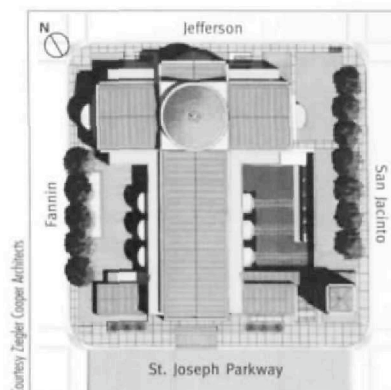
IF SOMEONE LOOKING AT THE MODEL of the new \$50 million Catholic cathedral planned for downtown Houston thinks they see in the design something vaguely familiar, Scott Ziegler doesn't object. Ziegler, principal of Ziegler Cooper Architects, the firm that's designing the cathedral for the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, admits that while conceiving a plan for the building, his team paid careful attention to what had gone before. "The goal," he says, "was to adhere to the traditional, but to also create a building of this millennium. We knew we couldn't do something completely traditional, of course, but we wanted to be rooted in a recognizable past."

The result, as unveiled in a press conference in late May, is a 2,100 seat structure with a Latin cross plan, an interior that soars to a height of 116 feet in the nave and 180 feet over the altar, a flattened dome, a 210-foot-tall free-standing campanile, and echoes of the Romanesque. The cathedral will sit in the middle block of a three-block strip owned by the diocese and will have a footprint of 30,800 square feet and a building area of 79,400 square feet on a site bounded by St. Joseph's Parkway, Fannin, Jefferson, and San Jacinto. It will be a strikingly vertical presence in what is an area of relatively low buildings, and will also be easily visible to the motorists driving along I-45 only two blocks to the south — especially once Sacred Heart Co-Cathedral, which sits on the block between the interstate and the site of the new cathedral, is demolished, something that is expected to happen in late 2004, after the new cathedral is finished. Work on the cathedral is anticipated to begin in the spring of next year.

In an important sense, that new cathedral will be the first true Catholic cathedral in Houston's history, say diocesan officials. Though Sacred Heart is designated a cathedral, when it was built in 1912 it was intended to serve only as the parish church for the Main Street residential district. The new cathedral will be the first specifically intended as a cathedral.

The only question was, how should that intent be translated into something physical? For Ziegler Cooper, the answer was to be found by delving into history. "We did an enormous amount of research on cathedrals, and discussed qualities people feel when they walk into a cathedral," Ziegler says. "What came

The Diocese
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cathedral



Site plan for the cathedral. The front façade will face southwest, toward I-45.

to mind was awe and wonderment of God, beautiful craftsmanship, and finally, just a testimony of faith. Then we asked ourselves, how does that inform a design? As you look across the construction of cathedrals of all ages, it came down to several common characteristics. One was verticality, the spirituality of a space, which begins to soar and create a mystical feeling. Second was the use of light — the layering of a space, and the light coming through that layering. Third was monumentality of scale, a scale that is there not to overwhelm man, but to make us feel the grandeur of God's presence in the worship space. That was the starting point."

Another starting point was a phrase in a letter issued by Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, the diocese's top official, at the time the selection process for the cathedral commission was announced. In that letter, Bishop Fiorenza noted that he hoped for something in the "traditional line of a cathedral." Ziegler Cooper took that to heart, and investigated to discover what, to the bishop, traditional meant. It became clear that Italian Romanesque, at least in plan and organization, was considered appealing, and so Romanesque elements were incorporated into the design.

The traditional emphasis in Houston is in contrast to two other major cathedral projects now under way, Rafael Moneo's Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, and Santiago Calatrava's Christ the Light Cathedral in Oakland, California. In both of those instances, the dioceses opted for something different rather than something recognizable. In the case of the Los Angeles cathedral, which is scheduled for completion late next year, Moneo, also architect of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Audrey Jones Beck Building, created a complex of heavy, solid shapes that suggests a temple from pre-history. In Oakland, Calatrava designed a light, open, ribbed structure that, in his phrase, "would be like a pair of hands [that] can be brought together in prayer or can be opened to the sky."

But while the Moneo and Calatrava cathedrals have drawn considerable praise, they've also been the source of some controversy within their dioceses. In Los Angeles, in particular, there have been complaints from a group of parishioners that Moneo's design is not in keep-



The new Houston cathedral, scheduled for completion in late 2004, will have a strong vertical presence, towering over its neighbors.

2326 Sunset



Edie Archer

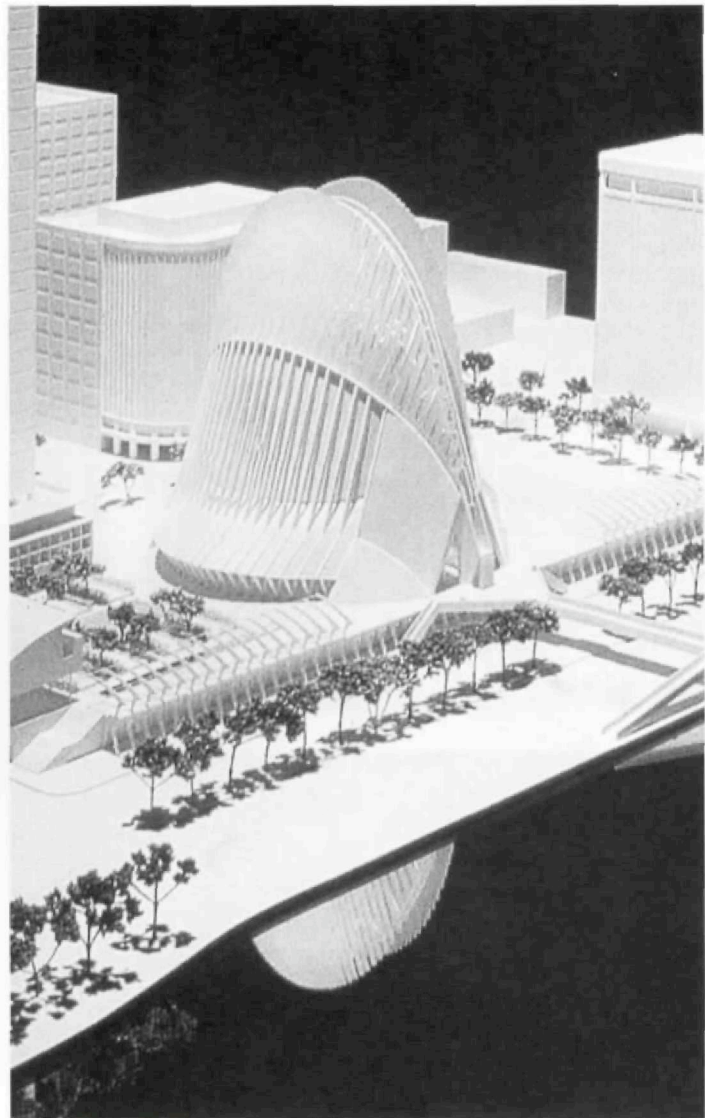
Greenwood King Properties ♦ 713.524.0888

109 Marrakech Court



Anne White

Greenwood King Properties ♦ 713.524.0888

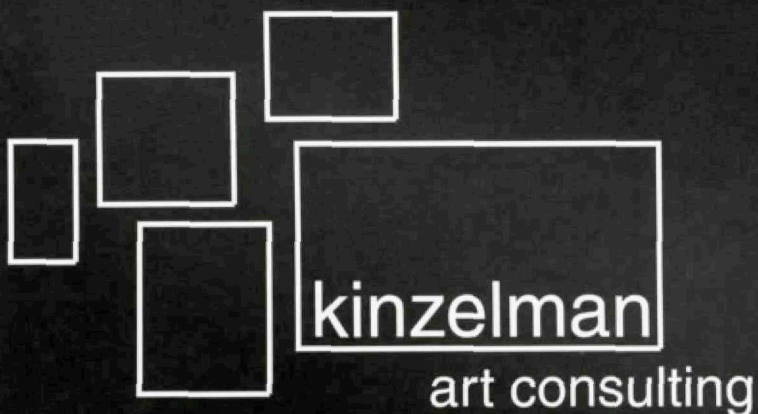


Courtesy Archdiocese of Oakland



Courtesy Archdiocese of Los Angeles

Top: Model of Oakland's Christ the Light Cathedral, Santiago Calatrava, architect.
Bottom: Model of Los Angeles' Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral complex, Rafael Moneo, architect.



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ing with Catholic practice.

Such complaints are unlikely to be raised about the new Houston cathedral. Indeed, it contains a number of elements consciously evocative of earlier cathedrals, among them a 200-seat crypt church beneath the floor of the altar space and a side garden court. But while Houston's cathedral unmistakably echoes the past, Ziegler says, it isn't bound by it. One major difference he points to is the emphasis on the vertical. Traditional cathedrals had wide side aisles supporting the nave, which meant worshipers moved through low-ceilinged areas before encountering the tall expanse leading to the altar. Since steel construction makes the side supports unnecessary, the Houston cathedral will be able to rise quickly to its full height, emphasizing its verticality. Too, Ziegler notes that the front of the cathedral will not be covered over in stone, but

will be made primarily out of two thin veils of clear glass sandwiching a layer of art glass, to allow light to pour inside.

"Our idea was that almost from the moment you enter the door, you're aware of the immensity of the space," Ziegler says. "We pushed for monumental scale, even though during discussions with the diocese there were questions about whether the size could be reduced. But we felt that for it to work as a cathedral, it had to be monumental."

"Very few generations have the privilege of building a cathedral," Ziegler notes. "So you have to consider that you're building for history. One of the statements we heard early on was that this was a building with a 500 year planning horizon. When you're thinking in those terms, it becomes a building for the ages, and you have to think big." — Mitchell J. Shields