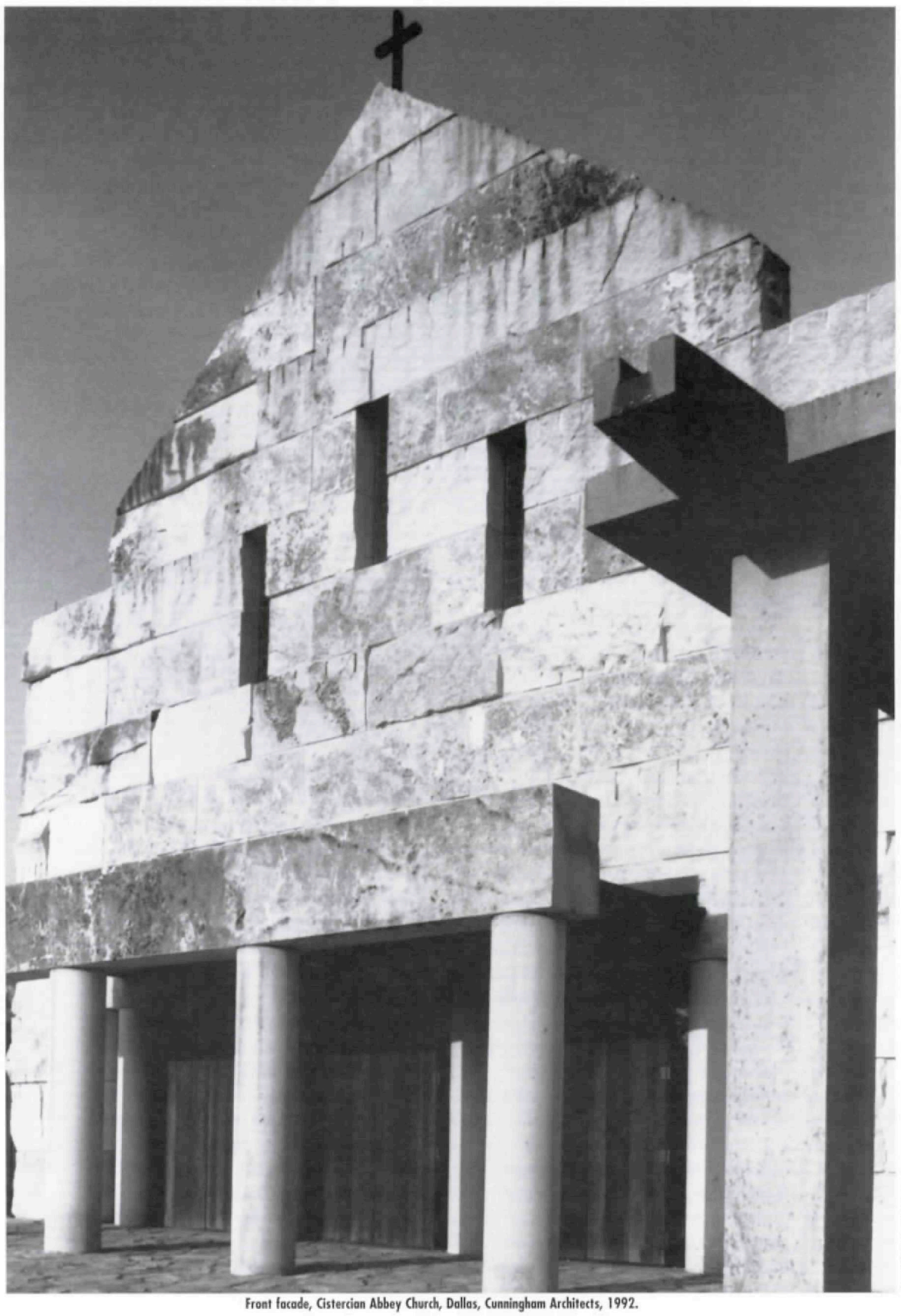
THE CHURCHES AND SYNAGOGUES OF GARY CUNNINGHAM

BY BARBARA KOERBLE



Front facade, Cistercian Abbey Church, Dallas, Cunningham Architects, 1992.

At nine o'clock on a warm August morning, a small group of visitors from Austin's Texas Fine Arts Association gathers in front of the Cistercian Abbey Church in Irving, Texas. They are there to admire the work of Gary Cunningham, a Dallas architect who in recent years has become known as one of the state's finest designers of religious structures. And the Cistercian Church, imposing and starkly impressive, is one of his best designs. The church's 40-foot-high stone facade is composed of stacked rectangular limestone blocks, each a weighty 5,000 pounds. On this morning, the massive stone wall is bathed in a sunlight so strong that one can see delicate veining in each block; some are stained with sooty streaks. The scars of the drill that split the rock face ring the top of each stone like a crown of thorns.

As the visitors look on, Cunningham tells how each huge stone was hewn. It's been many years since the work was completed, but his description makes it sound as if it happened yesterday. It's not just that he's told the story many times; it's also that he spent hours walking the quarry site near Midland, watching the cutting of the stones that would be reassembled in a simple nave form dating back centuries.

Such attention to materials and process is a Cunningham characteristic, as is his appreciation of religious tradition. He obviously relishes making historical connections, yet he also employs modern structural details.[1] The combination is just one of the things that has helped distinguish his church designs from those of his peers. Although he chafes at the constraints of stylistic labels, Cunningham might be described as an unorthodox modernist. Aesthetically, he favors volumetric forms and the honest expression of structure and materials. However, he also frequently pushes the limits when it comes to manipulating materials. He can enthusiastically enrich a plain concrete wall with willow branches, cast a bronze bell in the dirt, or crawl to the top of a church in the middle of the night to install a handmade cross. As Richard Ferrier, associate professor in the University of Texas Arlington's School of Architecture, notes, "What people recall about his works is his unique and very profound way of using materials. He gets out there and gets dirty. He wants to understand the process of building."

Cunningham first gained notice not for his churches, but for an office building. He established his Dallas-based firm in 1981, and by 1983 his first office building commission — Benchmark in Longview — had won a Texas Society of Architects Design Award. In 1986, Sharon Odum, who has been a stabilizing influence in the firm as it has grown to around ten employees, joined as a design principal. Cunningham Architects garnered more accolades in 1988 with a Dallas AIA Design Award for the Sesler residence in Dallas.[2] This was followed by an unusual house remodeling commission from Morton H. Meyerson, the namesake of Dallas' symphony center. Meyerson's home, originally a 1923 electric substation, was converted by Cunningham with an exhuberance bordering on the manic. Dubbed the "Power House," it provided ample opportunity for Cunningham's wit in the development of its electrical thematic subtext.

Grace Lutheran Church

During this period Cunningham was engaged to design his first church, Grace Lutheran in the Dallas suburb of Carrollton. Carrollton is filled with large brick homes squeezed on tiny lots; the dominant visual impression is their massive, shingled roof peaks projecting above brick privacy walls. Even the mailboxes are encased in brick. Within this bland setting was a barren rolling hill where Cunningham sited the church.

The design is spartan in its simplicity: the primary worship space is a square room topped with a wood-framed pyramidal roof bolted to exposed steel supports. Cunningham carefully differentiated spaces with materials. The 6,500-square-foot worship hall is built of concrete block with a copper clad roof. A brick classroom wing on the western side frames the sanctuary entrance, while support spaces on the north side were covered in clapboard siding. In Cunningham's master plan, the square sanctuary was to become a multi-purpose room, and a larger sanctuary and school eventually would be built within an axial plan. The high pitched roof of the worship hall projects above the L-shaped wings and calls attention to the significance of the sacred space. In future phases of development, Cunningham planned to continue the expression of significant spaces through their height, volumetric form, and use of singular materials.[3]

This first religious commission was a groundbreaking experience for the firm. With Grace Lutheran, Cunningham chose to bring the entire small congregation into the design process. Most of the congregation stayed after church each Sunday while Cunningham showed them images and discussed ideas. Rather than just working with a building committee, Cunningham was working with a community. Ever since Grace Lutheran, the firm's practice has been to bring clients as fully into the process as possible.

Though additions by others have tempered Cunningham's vision for Grace Lutheran in the ten years since it was built, its core design remains clear. The church's current pastor, Justin Kvanli, personally likes the spartan aesthetic. "The high ceiling is beautiful," he notes. "It brings to mind the loftiness of God."

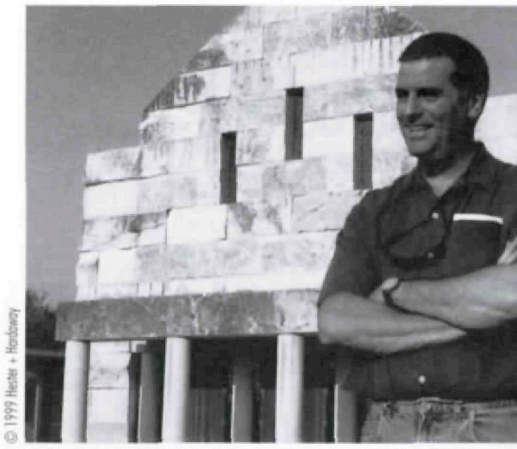
Cistercian Abbey Church

For Cunningham, the inception of work on the Cistercian Abbey Church in 1990 must have seemed like coming home. He had attended the Cistercian Abbey's Preparatory School for Boys from third grade through high school, from which he was graduated in 1972. As a result, he was well-versed in the history of the abbey and the lifestyle of the Cistercian monks.

Our Lady of Dallas Abbey was established in 1957 by a group of monks from Zirc, Hungary, who in the 1940s had fled persecution by the Communists. To investigate historic precedents for the abbey, Cunningham visited monasteries in Italy, Hungary, and Austria, spending nights in small, austere cell rooms. From his travels, Cunningham gleaned as much as he could about these simple load bearing structures. (A specific 13th-century Cistercian church in Bélapátfalva, Hungary, served as a model for the alternation of light and dark stones in the church's facade.) They also led to Cunningham's resolve to make his own design "very humble, very plain."

The Cistercian Abbey Church is sited to complete the north end of a monk's cloister, a modern 1962 international style structure by Dallas architects Adams and Adams. Visitors attending services ascend stairs from a parking area at the foot of the property to the summit of the hill. The steep ascent through a wooded grove provides an implicit processional, and a transition for the visitor from the nearby Highway 114 interchange.

The church's sanctuary is one of Cunningham's most stunning interiors. Within the nave, square, cast-in-place concrete columns support the load-bearing stone walls. The play of light enhances the rough beauty of the split-faced stone. Illumination enters the church from vertical



Architect Gary Cunningham in front of the Cistercian Abbey Church.

Interior, Cistercian Abbey Church. Light enters the sanctuary through vertical windows and skylights.

Side and front facade, Cistercian Abbey Church. A 13th-century church in Hungary provided a model for Cunningham's use of light and dark stones.

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The Epstein Chapel at Temple Shalom, Dallas, Cunningham Architects, 1991.

Drawing courtesy Cunningham Architects

A rendering of the plans for Prince of Peace Catholic Community, Plano, shows the extent of the commission, which included a main worship space, two small chapels, offices, a library, and a school.

Photo courtesy Cunningham Architects

Grace Lutheran, Carrollton, 1988, was Gary Cunningham's first religious commission.

windows above the altar and the entrance and clerestory openings inserted in the upper courses of the side walls. Skylights fill a continuous void along the top of the side walls, where the roof nearly intersects but does not touch the walls. Raking light enters though the skylights to wash the side walls.

The windows and skylights are filled with thick cast-glass tiles containing pits and bubbles that underscore their handmade qualities. In a similar gesture, the interior walls of the side aisles are covered with hand-troweled gray gypsum plaster enhanced by the streaking of added pigments. It's important to the Catholic liturgy, Cunningham notes, that materials in the church be handmade whenever possible.

The forces inherent in the structural system that supports the church's roof exhibit a sublime drama. While it may appear that divine intervention is holding up the roof, in fact it is high-tech engineering. The budget was insufficient for a stone vault, and Cunningham didn't want to use trusses, nor did he want the church's wooden roof to touch the side walls. As Cunningham explains, to deal with roof forces that could push the side walls over, steel knife plates were inserted between joints in the top course of stones to transfer the load. Tie rods prevent the stones from flipping up. The roof is further anchored by half inch stainless steel cables. Such high-tech flourishes, which were developed through consultation with structural engineer Jim Smith, are a trademark of Cunningham's firm. Conversely, the team members, with the assistance of Dallas sculptor David Synes, also engaged in low-tech fabrication of bronze chapel objects such as the cross and the bells. The downlights are simple welded cylinders, and the round knobs serving as handgrips at the entrance to the choir from the vestry were cast from potatoes.

The monks indicated their satisfaction with Cunningham's work by commissioning him to design a new library and classroom for the day school, which was dedicated in March 1998.

Temple Shalom

When Rabbi Kenneth Roseman and his building committee for Dallas' Temple Shalom began their search for an architectural firm to design a small chapel, their primary goal was to find one that would not bring preconceived ideas to the project. "We walked in there with zero knowledge ... and we got the job because we said they would have to teach us about all this," says Cunningham. "It was really a very sincere exchange of culture." The committee wanted a chapel to complement their main sanctuary, which seats 482 in theater style seating. The large worship space worked well for events such as High Holy Days, but an intimate space was needed for smaller gatherings.

Originally, it was assumed that the chapel would be attached to the main worship space, but after some discussion Cunningham persuaded his client to set the chapel apart and create a courtyard space between the two buildings. The chapel was developed as a circle bisected by a glass wall. Through that wall the courtyard can be seen, which serves to bring nature into the worship. A white partition wall provides a backdrop for the essential components of the services: the bimah, a raised platform from which the Torah is read, the Ark containing the Torah, the Eternal Light, and the reading table. The semi-circular space designed for the chapel served the committee's charge to bring congregants close to the bimah and the Ark. And with the use of pew seating rather than auditorium seating, the result was a very intimate chapel that seats 175.

A 100-foot passage connects the vestibule of the main sanctuary to the new chapel. Upon entering the hallway, an angled window on the left side directs one's gaze across the courtyard to the chapel itself; through a slotted opening, the Eternal Light can be glimpsed. The corridor is designed as a progression through time and space. A series of vertical windows allow views of the courtyard to the left; the corridor leads toward a glass wall at the end. Cunningham incorporated into the left wall rectangular pieces of colored cast glass that gradually change in hue from clear blue to dark sapphire, deepening the corridor's mood-enhancing aspects. At the glass wall, one takes a sharp turn to the left, then after a short passage, another sharp turn into the chapel itself. Upon entering the chapel, one follows a corridor along a curving wall. Vertical windows in this wall are filled with green cast glass tiles that give this portion of the interior an almost aqueous feeling.

For all of its subtle qualities, the Epstein Chapel, named for the family that funded it, also displays Cunningham's structural skills. The roof of the chapel is supported by wooden gluelam beams that radiate from the load-bearing outer walls and converge at the center of the half circle. They are supported by a steel beam formed in a half circle; the ends of this cantilevered beam rest on two concrete columns, and are connected with one inch steel rods to piers sunk 20 feet into the ground.

Countering this high-tech detailing is the chapel's emphasis on nature and community. The courtyard is planted with parallel rows of yaupon holly trees that echo the rows of pews within the chapel. The courtyard's lush foliage provides a balance to the cool tonalities of the chapel interior.

Prince of Peace

Flush with the success of the Cistercian Abbey Church and Temple Shalom's Epstein Chapel, in 1992 Cunningham and Sharon Odum ventured into what seemed like familiar territory, accepting a first phase design commission for the Prince of Peace Catholic Community in the north Dallas suburb of Plano. The commission included a large worship space to seat 1,000, two smaller chapels, offices, a library, and a first phase of a school. It was their largest religious commission to date.

For Cunningham and Odum, Prince of Peace proved to be both their most

Prince of Peace Catholic Community, Plano, 1994. Top: Concrete panels for Prince of Peace's school building were textured with rock salt and willow branches. Bottom: Prince of Peace's conical roof is supported by tree-like steel columns on the interior.

multi-layered and complicated project. "Prince of Peace [involved a] school and a suburb and a set of raw land — a very, very rich set of parameters," Cunningham says. "I mean, it was all a blank canvas and starting from scratch." He and Odum took Vatican II, which in 1962 had called for liturgical reforms within the Catholic Church, as their bible, but their clients appear to have been divided about some of these tenets being applied to the new buildings. Father James Balint and others on the building committee dedicated to Vatican II reforms requested that the architects follow the guidelines contained in *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*. According to this document, "A good architect will possess both the willingness to learn from the congregation and sufficient integrity not to allow the community's design taste or preference to limit the freedom necessary for a creative design. The architect will look to the congregation and clergy for an understanding of the character and purpose of the liturgical assembly. With that rapport, it is the architect's task to design the space, using contemporary materials and modes of construction, in dialogue with consultants who are expert in the areas of liturgical art, rites, acoustics, and other specialized issues."[4]

With that in mind, Lyle Novinski of the University of Dallas was hired as a liturgical consultant, and with his assistance symbolic design elements were developed. The most obvious example can be seen in the use of water as metaphor, beginning with the baptismal font, which is the first feature encountered when entering the church. Dallas sculptor Brad Goldberg was selected to carve the font out of stone, and as Cunningham explains, "water became the organizing element of the whole project."

It is typical of Cunningham's approach to make a thorough inventory of the site, and when he did so he discovered that a creek had once existed on the property. So he designed a very organic, curvilinear concrete drainage channel to collect water runoff. Drawing an analogy to the "different species in nature" that once came to the creek to drink, Cunningham says he based his design concept on the idea that the water that originated from the baptismal font fed and nourished all who came to know God.

Cunningham proposed that cars not be parked close to the church, but that congregants walk along an outdoor pathway that he termed the "Processional Way." This would give people a short time to prepare for worship. For Cunningham, this was a natural development of the processionals in both the Cistercian Abbey and Temple Shalom. All of the significant buildings in the Prince of Peace project, including the library, faced onto the Processional Way. In Cunningham's master plan for phase two, a cafeteria was planned for the area south of the church. The intent was to complete a courtyard enclosure in front of the church. Much of this design work was related to Cunningham's desire to create an "internal village" for the congregation, which had previously met in movie theaters and school buildings. Later, after Cunningham's involvement with the project ended, this area became a parking lot.

The church building itself is a dramatic structure. Its conical shaped roof is supported by interior tree-like steel columns. Cunningham liked this geometric form, commenting that the "volume has a level of importance and heroism." An advantage of a circular church with a round plan was the development of seating that brought congregants as close to the altar as possible.

Some of the problems Cunningham and Odum encountered were caused by the budget of $110 per square foot for the church and $55 per square foot for the school. (The budget for the Cistercian Abbey Church was $200 per square foot.) To save money, the pair spent hours fabricating many of Prince of Peace's handmade objects, such as the light fixtures. Odum observes, "It's a way for us to get richness in projects that the client couldn't afford." Also because of the tight budget, it was decided to use tilt-up concrete construction for the school building.

Cunningham, Odum, and their clients participated in texturing the tilt-up panels for the school building with rock salt and willow branches. The branches came from trees on the site, and were dragged through the wet concrete. Delicate impressions of leaves are also imprinted on many of the panels. Despite this, the view of a concrete wall from a nearby parkway, and the rough and ready character of the school, caused controversy. As a result, when time came for phase two of the Prince of Peace project to begin, Cunningham Architects was passed over in favor of Corgan Associates of Dallas.

Cunningham has little to say about the Corgan addition, but it's obvious that he thinks it disrupted the conceptual planning underpinning his phase one. With its liberal use of brick veneer and appropriated forms, Corgan's second phase not only blurs Cunningham's distinction between sacred and secular spaces, but also encases much of Cunningham's school building, concealing some of the tilt-up panels.

Since Prince of Peace, Cunningham Architects have completed two smaller religious commissions, one a renovation/expansion project for Saint Peter's Episcopal Church in McKinney and the other a renovation of the Arapaho United Methodist Church. In these, as in his earlier designs, Cunningham's reductive aesthetic has been a blessing. The firm's dedication to honest expression of function and use of materials also makes it sympathetic to religious structures. Cunningham's idealism seems to have served him best when working with clients steeped in tradition, such as the monks of the Cistercian order and the Temple Shalom building committee. He's found newer congregations such as Prince of Peace more challenging, as there may be no consensus among the congregants about the nature of the church.[5]

Still, Cunningham's next religious commission, a master plan for the Faith Episcopal Church in Allen, Texas, sounds like a good fit. The congregation uses a rock band and video projectors in their services. He's very taken with the site: "It's a beautiful site in a grove of hackberry trees ... a floodplain, with bits of prairie." It's not surprising that Cunningham would get excited about something as mundane as hackberry trees. "They're not fancy trees in themselves," he says, "but they have a lot of strength."

In other words, faith grows where it's planted. ■

1. In her page 8G story for the *Dallas Morning News* on March 16, 1996, reporter Alison Hamilton noted that an interesting complement to Cunningham's sometimes irreverent modernity is his utter respect for listening to "what the rules are" when it comes to the requirements of church liturgy.

2. Cunningham's religious architecture has also won a number of awards, among them the 1990 Dallas AIA Design Award for Grace Lutheran; the 1992 Texas Society of Architects Design Award and the 1993 Dallas AIA Design Award for Cistercian Abbey Church; the 1992 Dallas AIA Design Award for Temple Shalom; and the 1995 Dallas AIA Design Award for Prince of Peace, Phase 1.

3. Unfortunately, those plans were never completed. Today, the purity of the church's form is somewhat marred by exposed air conditioning units and accretions such as metal service buildings. Cunningham's original conception has also been altered by a brick wall that was layered over the clapboard siding on the north side.

4. *Environment and Art In Catholic Worship* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1977), p. 23.

5. Some of the difficulties stemmed from the fact that Cunningham and Odum were not the first choice of the church's building committee, which spent a year working on a design with Phillips Swager Associates of Dallas, who brought in Chicago architect Ben Weese as design consultant. Then Phillips Swager Associates was fired, and Cunningham Architects hired. Odum feels that the committee may have been burned out by this point, and that this may have exacerbated later problems. In hindsight, Odum wishes that she and Cunningham had requested a new building committee. For a detailed examination of the controversy see "From Bauhaus to God's House" by Mark Branch, *Dallas Observer*, October 26, 1995.

HOUSES *of the* HOLY

PHOTO ESSAY BY PAUL HESTER

SRI MEENAKSHI TEMPLE, 1982
Hindu
17130 McLean Road

The third traditional Hindu temple built in in the United States, and the first devoted to a goddess (Sri Meenakshi), this Brazoria County landmark has become a place of pilgrimage for Hindus from across the Southwest. Designed by two noted Indian temple architects, Padmasri S.M. Ganapathy Sthapathi and Padmasri Muthiah Sthapathi, it was built by artisans imported from India.

It wasn't really that long ago that Houston, like the state and nation it's a part of, could be fairly accurately described as a Christian community. It's not that Christianity was the only religion practiced in the city — Judaism, of course, was present, as well as other faiths — but its dominance was unquestioned. This was particularly true in terms of physical presence. Churches could be found almost anywhere you looked, from the neo-gothic spires downtown to the sprawling mega-complexes beyond Loop 610. Other traditions tended to be less obvious, their adherents meeting in rented auditoriums or renovated business space. The architecture that marked their history was nowhere to be seen.

Since the mid-'80s, though, that's changed. While Christian churches are still by far Houston's most common religious structures, mosques that would not look out of place in the Middle East and temples that would fit easily into the landscape of India or China can also be found. Richard Vara, the *Houston Chronicle*'s award-winning religion reporter, remembers that when he started working his beat in the mid-'80s he had to look hard to find non-traditional stories. But by the early '90s, he could drive around Houston and see the city's newly emerging faiths in newly emerging buildings.

Rice University sociologist Stephen Klineberg points to the immigration boom of the last two decades as one possible reason for this change. During the 1970s, when Harris County grew by 38 percent, most of the new Houstonians were Anglos from other parts of America. But between 1982 and 1990, when Harris County grew another 17 percent, the Anglo population grew only 1 percent. The Hispanic and African-American populations grew 75 and 12.5 percent respectively, but the most astonishing increase was that of the Asian population, which expanded 129 percent. The influx of non-European immigrants has continued throughout the 1990s, says Klineberg, putting Houston, along with Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Miami, at the forefront of America's transformation into what Klineberg terms the first truly "universal nation."

Part of the culture these new Houstonians bring with them is the culture of their religion, and as their numbers grow to sufficient size, that culture is expressed in religious structures — structures that often, like the immigrants themselves, end up in the city's suburbs. Already, Houston's followers of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism have made their presence known through their houses of worship. That these temples tend to follow traditional designs isn't surprising; for many of the faithful, these holy places are ties not just to the infinite, but to an ancestral home. They are buildings both of belief, and of memory.
Mitchell J. Shields