



Jason Reiffer

Focal Point

James VanderMolen

IN OUR ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN for renovations to the John R. Mulder Memorial Chapel at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, we did not start with a blank piece of paper. Not only did the existing chapel have “good bones” — solid infrastructure, historic design elements, a magnificent organ — but the committee had thoroughly researched and eloquently expressed their reflections on the theological importance of spaces for worship and on their vision for a transformation of the chapel that would integrate the functional, the pedagogical, and the transcendent.

Western Theological Seminary, affiliated with the Reformed Church in America, offers graduate degrees in theology and ministry to approximately 230 full- and part-time students. Mulder Chapel was built in the Colonial style as part of the current seminary building in the mid-1950s, with a traditional rectangular nave flanked by arched windows, a recessed raised chancel, and a rear balcony. Aside from the installation of a custom-built Van Daalen pipe organ in 1995, the chapel has changed little in subsequent years.

Re-imagining the chapel

The chapel is used primarily for daily worship services conducted by seminary students as part of their training



Top: *Gifts of Grace*,
7 of 10 chapel windows,
Western Theological
Seminary, Holland, MI
✦ 2012b

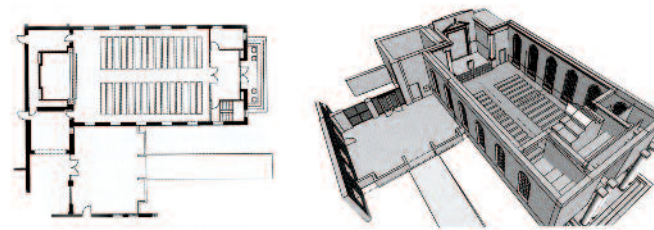
Right: Historic view of
the John R. Mulder
Chapel

Overleaf:
Detail,
City of God
narthex
window,
Western
Theological
Seminary,
Holland, MI
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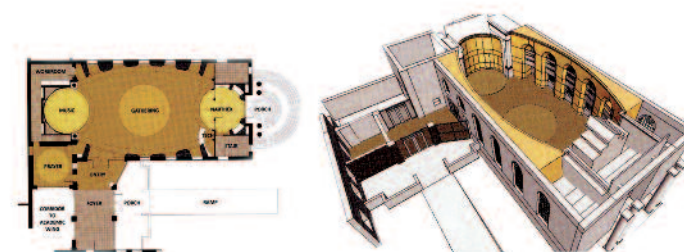


in exploring fresh ideas in worship planning. Secondary uses include weddings, funerals, organ and chamber recitals, and lectures. Increasingly, the effectiveness of the chapel in meeting the needs of both worship and learning was in question. The traditional arrangement of fixed pews facing a raised chancel limited flexibility for innovation. Moreover, there was a vexing circulation bottleneck: while the traditional entry portico and narthex faced a pedestrian lawn on the north, primary access to the chapel for students, staff, and visitors was from the seminary's central corridor through a single narrow door just to the side of the chancel, providing little in the way of preparatory reflection or gathering.

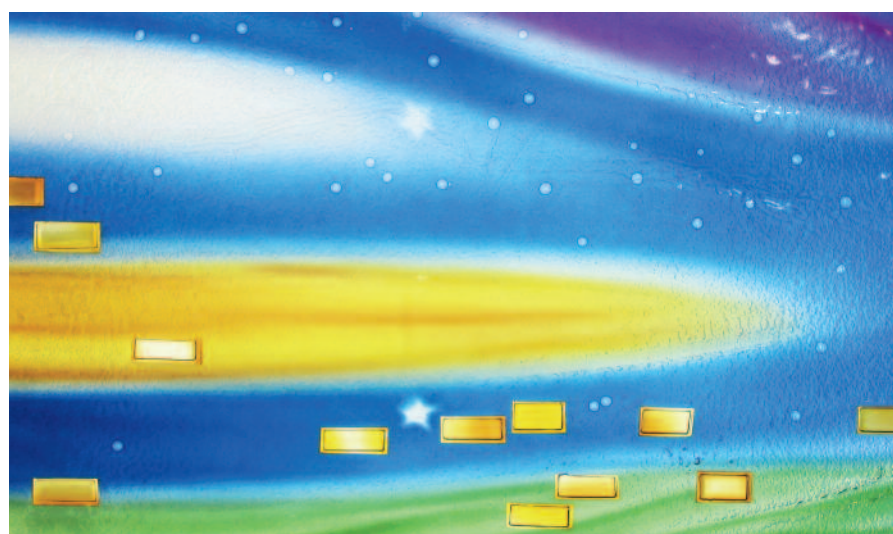
To address these concerns, reflect changes in worship practice, and prepare students to adapt to disparate settings in their future locations, the seminary's desires were simple and clear: relocate the focal point of the space from the chancel to the centre of the nave and replace fixed pews with flexible seating to foster a sense of gathering and allow multiple locations for



Left: Original layout of the chapel and narthex, and the proposed changes, courtesy of James VanderMolen



Bottom: Detail, *Gifts of Grace*, chapel window, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI
 ♦ 2012b



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presiders and worshippers; provide up-to-date audio/visual and lighting technology along with outstanding natural acoustics for any possible seating configuration, along with user-friendly controls for mostly untrained and infrequent users; and create a legacy project that would radically update the worship environment while respecting its heritage.

The design team led the chapel committee through a visioning process that explored the team members' sensibilities about spatial definition and enclosure (both natural and built), patterns of human gathering, styles of worship activities, and forms of worship environments. Participants viewed and discussed a varied series of iconic images selected to elicit a wide range of responses. The design solution represents a poetic response to the consensus that emerged from the resulting discussions.

A new intervention

Upon seeing the chapel, reading the faculty's reflections on theological space, and listening to the aspirations of the

committee, we were struck by the images of the ceiling opening up to create a luminous vertical axis and of the chapel walls inflecting toward the light in a spatial embrace. We also understood early on that the power of the design would reside in a strong relationship between what the original chapel had been and what the new intervention would bring. To completely obscure the original details would be to disrupt the continuum of memory and meaning elicited by the chapel in the hearts and minds of many current students and alumni. We determined to make of our design a sort of ongoing dialogue between the old and the new in which both had something beautiful to say. That sense of transformation as redemption rather than replacement drove the design process.

To the east of the nave, the new glass entry and narthex expand from the existing central corridor, with the old entrance hall converted to a prayer room accessible directly from the chapel. In the chapel itself, a refined arcaded enclosure made of maple, cherry, and plaster was inserted within the walls of the



Gifts of Grace, 1 of 10 chapel windows,
Western Theological Seminary,
Holland, MI ♦ 2012b

and opening the space vertically to admit the “theophanic presence” of the Divine. Additional circular ceiling clouds above a musicians’ apse on one end and under the existing pipe organ on the other set up an antiphonal relationship between traditional and contemporary instrumentation and enhance the natural acoustics. The circular forms of the oculus and the ceiling clouds are shadowed in the flooring, subtly defining liturgical zones and providing hard, reflective surfaces where they are needed. New liturgical furnishings further explore the shapes and forms introduced in the architectural elements, responding to the more intimate scale with a varied and tactile quality.

Art glass

The art glass by Sarah Hall, incorporated into the renovated chapel helps unify the spatial experience. Themes were chosen for narthex and prayer room windows: *The Tree of Life* and *The City of God*. However, when asked what was desired for the chapel windows someone on the committee smiled and said: “We want everything.” Thus the chapel windows’ theme, *Gifts of Grace*, was born.

The committee offered thoughts about inspiration, exploration, and the continuum of memory, making it clear that the artwork for the new chapel was meant to inspire spiritual meditation and to generate discussion, not copy well-known images. The idea that resonated the most was “continuum of memory,” which opened the door for symbols and visual impressions to be imprinted in the glass. The window designs draw on the strong connections between the seminary, human and religious history, the local community, and the surrounding landscape. They include local imagery: Lake Michigan, trees by the lake, sand dunes, and even the town plan of Holland. As part of its exploration of the continuum of memory the windows include subtle impressions from the past, created by pressing historically and spiritually significant shapes and symbols into the plaster

existing nave, inflecting toward the new central focal point to create an elliptical space. The new walls barely touch the existing colonial details, which are abstracted and echoed in the form and profile of the gently curving arcade, establishing a dialogue between old and new. The arched niches of the arcade extrude the shape of the existing round-top windows along shifting axes, channelling exterior light toward the centre, while panes of art glass bridging the niches mitigate the effects of glare and articulate themes of creation and redemption.

A floating, highly detailed, and technology-rich wood ceiling subtly integrates sound, lighting, and projection equipment, concealed in wood-panelled folds and recesses. Pulling free from the perimeter enclosure, the radial ceiling frames a covered, illuminated oculus, allowing glimpses of the original barrel-vaulted ceiling, reinforcing the new central focus of the space,

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Top: *City of God*, narthex window that includes current town plan of Holland, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI
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Centre: Two narthex windows, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI
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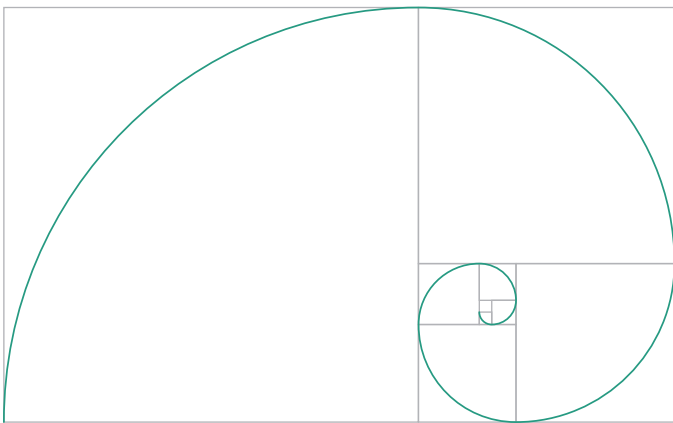
Bottom: Detail, *Tree of Life*, narthex window, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI
✦ 2012b



bed that supported the glass when it was shaped and fired in the kilns. These shapes include the symbols of Alpha and Omega, a key, symbols of the Passion, grapes, wheat, a star, a fish, a shape symbolizing the "Hand of God," and many others.

Conclusion

Since the first service in the newly renovated chapel, the innovations have transformed not only a venerable yet limiting space, but also the daily experiences of the seminary students and staff. As committee member and Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship Arts Ron Rienstra observes, "The space itself demands that we make the central things of worship central. As the students connect praise, proclamation, and prayer to the symbolic elements of the faith that point to Jesus ... the students and the congregation are reminded why we gather in the first place."



James VanderMolen, AIA, is the president of Elevate Studio in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and specializes in worship environments and liturgical furnishings.

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