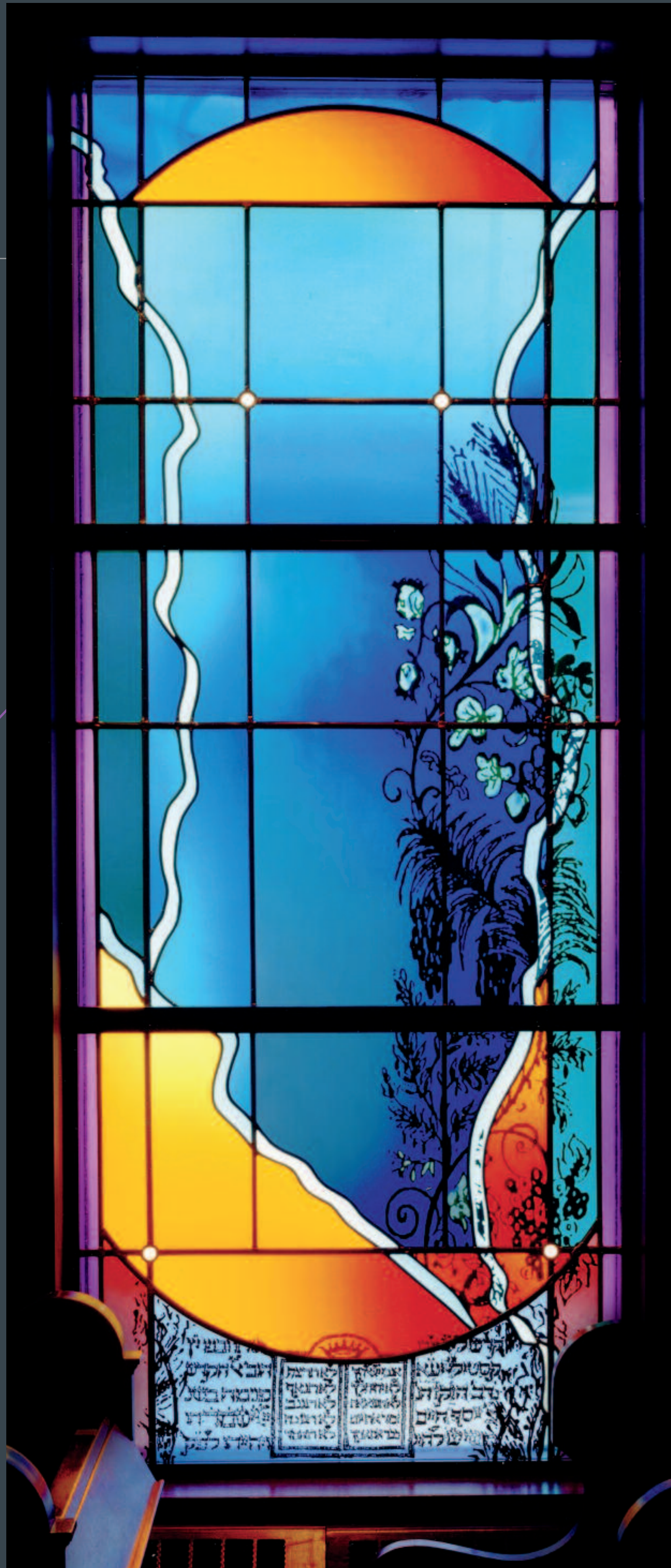


Andre Beneteau

Faith and Space in 3 Dimensions

In my Father's house are many mansions.
(John 14:2)

Peter Coffman

"YOU CAN HAVE A SENSE of the sacred with just two people in a closet," according to Monsignor Cory Grimes, former pastor at St. Andrew Catholic Church in Columbus, Ohio. He may be right, but the fact is that human beings have always gone to a lot of trouble to create sacred spaces. The ancient Greeks built temples that epitomized reason, balance and intellectual sophistication (even though the gods they venerated often displayed just the opposite qualities). For St. Simeon Stylites in the fourth century, sacred space was the top of the 60-foot column upon which he stood and prayed ceaselessly for the last thirty years of his life. In the Middle Ages, cathedrals like Chartres and Canterbury were the earthly prefiguration of the heavenly Jerusalem. They were meant to look as though they did not belong in this world. Three stained glass projects by artist Sarah Hall — two churches and one synagogue — vividly show how different faith communities require different kinds of sacred space.

Two churches and a synagogue

"The problem in churches," according to Philip Markwood, architect of St. John Lutheran Church in Dublin, Ohio, "always begins with the people and their religious understanding and trying to find ways to give them as

Overleaf:
Shavu'ot Minhah,
chapel,
Beth Tikvah
Synagogue,
Toronto, ON
✧ *1999b*

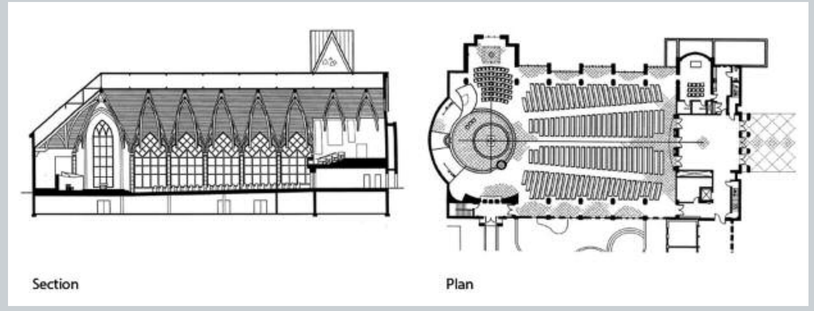
Bottom:
Interior view
towards altar with
Mystery of the
Rosary windows
to the right,
St. Andrew
Catholic Church
Columbus, OH
✧ *1997c*

many answers as you can." One person who has found many different answers is award-winning stained glass artist Sarah Hall; she has designed windows for numerous Christian denominations as well as synagogues. For St. Andrew and St. John, the commissions were strikingly similar in some ways: two Christian churches built just a few miles and a couple of years apart, both designed by accomplished local architects, both using the same stained glass artist. But — and it's a big but — one community is Catholic and the other Lutheran. Different faiths, different mansions.

These differences are immediately apparent from the outside of each building. St. Andrew is long and narrow, echoing the basilica form first used for Christian churches in the fourth century. St. John is much more spatially concentrated, gathering the faithful within a tighter, centrally planned space. These design choices were rooted not in taste but theology. "We [the clergy] don't run the church," explains St. John's pastor, Dave Reimann. "We participate with the others who are present, leading and guiding, according to the word." Believing fervently in what he terms "the priesthood of all believers," Reimann wanted a floor and seating plan that would place him physically close to the congregation, giving the whole community a sense of participation in the service. The sense of gathering was one of the underlying design principles of the church. The agenda at St. Andrew could hardly have been more different. "The vision here was not community, but communion," says Father Tom Buffer, who oversaw the construction of the church. Any space would do if the members of the community only wanted to meet each other; St. Andrew was to be a place where they would meet God. And, Buffer insists, even when the community is absent, the church is still the house of God: "Even when no human being is doing anything in here, God lives here. God is always here, even when we're not prancing about, shouting and singing and ringing bells and swinging censors."

Where does this leave the stained glass artist? With such different requirements of the buildings, it's safe to assume that

Peter Coffman



Peter Krajnak

Top: Exterior views and plan of St. Andrew Catholic Church, Columbus, OH

Bottom: East gable window with painted insets depicting the *Glorious Mysteries*,
St. Andrew Catholic Church, Columbus, OH ✧ *1997c*

Peter Coffman

these two congregations are not going to share the same ideas about stained glass windows — what they should look like and what kind of experience they should facilitate. Sarah Hall is reluctant to generalize about Catholic and Protestant art, but she did find striking differences between the two commissions.

"St. John was mainly concerned with how the artwork reflects Scripture," she says. "They wanted both the figure and the story to be absolutely the main focus of the window. And they did not want the figure to be overly interpreted by an artist." Pastor Reimann confirms this: "The purpose has to be the message. It's not just a series of lines and drawings. As in any art — any artist worth his salt always has something in the back of his mind that he's trying to communicate." Abstraction was out of the question: "There are enough stumbling blocks in life that keep people from knowing the Gospel that we don't want to go out of our way to create an extra stumbling block, when the message could be very clearly communicated."

The community at St. Andrew, while also insistent on figural windows, was far less focused on the figures themselves. In comparison to Dave Reimann, Tom Buffer's attitude toward them seems almost casual: "You could have left them out entirely, but having them there is a gain." While the five huge east windows of St. Andrew have a clear iconography — the Mysteries of the Rosary — the story works itself out abstractly as well as through the figures. An abstract "landscape" in the lower register provides an emotional parallel to the narrative panel above. Sarah Hall explains, "In the landscape there is a story in and of itself. The story begins in winter, with a landscape that's quite dormant, with only a suggestion of movement and growth. As you progress through the windows, the landscape becomes more and more alive, as does the story. The story moves through the five Joyful Mysteries to the five Glorious Mysteries. I tried to parallel the landscape symbolically with the story."

Interior views and screen printed detail of an aisle window, St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH ✧ *1998e*

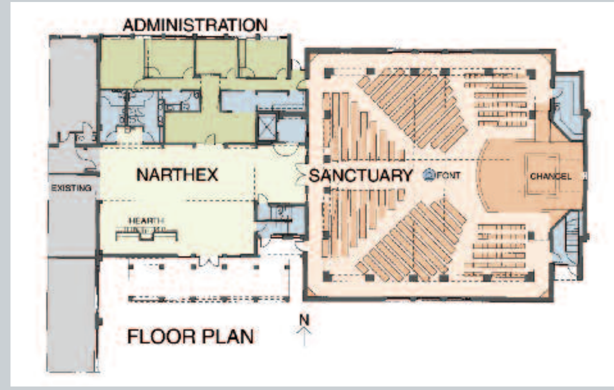
Peter Coffman

The role of figural art in the church has long been a theological football. On the one hand, it makes sense that St. John, with its Protestant emphasis on preaching to the community, should demand windows that are, first and last, illustrations of biblical stories. At St. Andrew, with its emphasis on individual communion with God, one would naturally expect art that invites a more subjective engagement. On the other hand, should these examples prove a temptation to make denominational generalizations, it is worth remembering a bit of history: It is the Catholic Church that has enjoyed an unbroken 1,700-year relationship with figural art, while the Protestants began life eschewing a great deal of that art. Nor do the positions taken by St. Andrew and St. John represent anything like the full range of current ideas on the subject.

Beth Tikvah Synagogue in Toronto recently added a set of three windows to a small chapel. They, too, chose Sarah Hall, but there was never any question about wanting windows that would look anything like those at St. Andrew or St. John. "In the Jewish religion, we tend not to depict images of people or animals, because there's this concept against graven images," explains Bob Cohen, a member of the congregation at Beth Tikvah. "We don't want to think in terms of creating other idols to be worshipped."

This is music to the ears of many contemporary artists, perhaps particularly of stained glass artists, who might feel that using storytelling windows as a "poor man's Bible" for the benefit of an illiterate society should be behind us. "It gave me the freedom to explore things more deeply than when I'm given very literal parameters," admits Hall. "I think I can offer better art when I'm given more freedom."

Sue Freedman, another member of the congregation at Beth Tikvah, would agree. An artist by training, she is well aware of the rich figural tradition in Christian stained glass. She once visited the Sainte Chapelle in Paris and was deeply impressed by



Phillip Markwood

Top: Exterior view and plan of St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH

Bottom: *Baptism* window, St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH ✧ *1998e*

Peter Coffman

Andre Beneteau

Detail, *Shavu'ot Minhah*, Beth Tikvah Synagogue, Toronto, ON ✧ *1999b*

the beauty of the windows there. The figural imagery, however, left her cold, and not just for doctrinal reasons. "They have a static quality to them that is very rigid. And it tells me that the dogma is unbending. It doesn't recognize changes in life — not just in an era, but a normal lifetime." To Freedman, the more figural an image is, the more static the message and experience are. Hall's highly abstracted work at Beth Tikvah struck just the right note, leaving room for nuance, interpretation and reassessment: "One of the things I loved about Sarah's work was that I saw an ever-changing quality to it."

The sacred spectrum

Underlying differing views of figural and abstract church art is a fundamental question. Is the sacred an object of knowledge — a series of propositions to be considered, explained and intellectually understood? Or is it an object of experience, the core of which cannot be contained in words or fully grasped by the intellect? Most people would probably say it has elements of both. But between these two poles lies a wide spectrum, and most people lean toward one or the other side of it. Exactly where they settle has a profound effect on the nature of the sacred art and architecture they choose.

The sacred word

At St. John, and possibly for many Protestants, knowledge of Scripture is paramount. Thus, the church is not an awe-inspiring prefiguration of the heavenly Jerusalem — it is a gathering place for the faithful. It is not a place where one goes in search of a sublime experience; it is a place where one seeks to understand the word better. And the job of the stained glass windows is not primarily artistic or even ornamental but narrative. "We wanted our stained glass to tell stories," explains parishioner Stephanie Freiberg. "We didn't want it just to be symbols or abstract things. We wanted people to be able to look at it and tell what it was and understand the story." For Pastor Reimann, the greatest asset of the windows is how the stories they tell can be integrated into sermons: "I can pretty much create an object lesson out of anything in life. I can take the colours and talk about Noah. I can take glass and create a message out of it."

The sacred mystery

St. Andrew was built with different values in mind. "We wanted to create a space," says architect Peter Krajnak, "which would be

Detail, *Sukkot Shaharit,* Beth Tikvah Synagogue, Toronto, ON ✧1999b

Andre Beneteau

capable of bearing the weight of mystery." The mysterious can never be an object of knowledge; by definition, it is perceived in incomplete fragments that point to something beyond reach. As such, St. Andrew places profoundly different demands on its windows, and as a result the windows require a profoundly different kind of response. "The windows make being inside very different from being outside," notes Father Tom Buffer. "You do have a liminal experience when you cross the threshold, and a great deal of that is those windows." For parishioner Laura Fisher, the effect is unforgettable: "I felt, as I stood in front of the window, that I was in a waterfall of colour. The colour was above me, behind me, in front of me, below me; I was drenched in colour, my mind and my soul. It brings me a spiritual joy, and I find the presence of Christ."

The sacred spirit

At Beth Tikvah, while figures were not used, an iconographic program was designed around the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. The windows were meant to bring joy to the chapel and to be an invitation to prayer. The brunt of that job falls to the purely abstract design elements like colour, line, texture and composition. By all accounts, they do their job admirably. "When something so beautiful is created, it delights the soul," says Sue Freedman. "Every time I walk in the chapel now, I truly feel uplifted. It's the same feeling I get from the music in the synagogue."

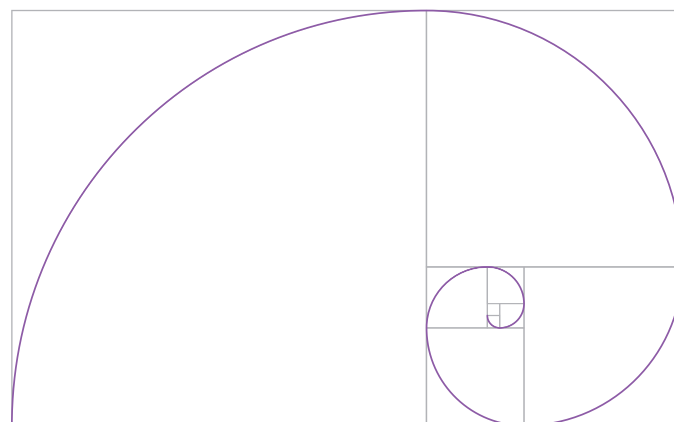
Different dimensions of the holy

Different faiths, different mansions. Yet, as Sarah Hall is quick to point out, we can't generalize about Catholics, Lutherans and Jews based simply on these examples. "It is kind of fun to make generalizations, and it helps to give a handle on the world," she admits. "But you could find a Protestant congregation that was really open to modern, nonfigurative art. You could find Catholics who didn't want any figures. You could find a Jewish congregation who wanted figures. So I think that even though I experienced a lot of differences in working with these different congregations, they were just being themselves."

"Building a building is about struggle," says architect Philip Markwood, who should know. "It's not like birthing, but it must be close." The problem of how to make an ordinary building into a sacred one is an old problem. The Judeo-Christian tradition has been grappling with it ever since Solomon decided to build a house in God's name, only to wonder: *But who is able to build a house for him, for the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain him?* (1 Kings 8:27).

A quick glance through the history of Western architecture suggests that Solomon's may be the most frequently answered rhetorical question of all time. Millennia later, we still haven't found a definitive answer.

Let's hope we never think we have.



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