

Addition Is Space To Believe In

Fine New Chapel At R.I. Church Achieves Thoughtful Grace

By WILLIAM MORGAN

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The new chapel at the Shepherd of the Valley Church in Scituate, R.I., demonstrates that satisfying architecture is more the product of the heart than the purse. Consecrated in October, the chapel is small and unassuming — an inexpensive addition to an unremarkable church on a road far from downtown.

Almost in spite of itself, the 60-seat chapel achieves a quality and dignity that fancier buildings with huge budgets rarely achieve.

Just over the Cranston line on Seven Mile Road — and close to where the Copts are building a new church — Shepherd of the Valley is the sort of white-bread Protestant church found all over exurban America. An amalgam of two older Methodist congregations, optimistically named Phenix (sic) and Hope — they once occupied attractive Victorian wooden churches of 1859 and 1875, respectively.

Shepherd of the Valley dates from about 1972, employing an off-the-rack package from Stanmar, a manufacturer of pre-fabricated buildings. Laminated ribs spanning the sanctuary, along with some furniture saved from the older churches, offer a hint of a Gothic Revival past.

The catalyst for new design was not aesthetic yearning, but a need for space. The pastor of Shepherd of the Valley at the time, Lynn McCracken, asked Kyna Leski, a fellow rower at the Narragansett Boat Club, for advice and then hired Leski and partner Chris Bardt to prepare a master plan for the church complex. A slow process of studies and fund-raising ensued, while McCracken moved on to another pastorate. The congregation resisted the idea of a new worship space as being extravagant, so the architects proposed a children's chapel that could be used for other functions as well.

Leski and Bardt, Harvard-trained professors at Rhode Island School of Design and principals of the Providence architectural firm 3SIX0, had never designed a church. The designers, known for their theoretical studies and for an astringent work based on detailed explorations of light, as well as high-end restaurants in Boston, New York and Memphis, would seem an unlikely fit for rural Rhode Island. Shepherd of the Valley, however, became a learning experience for both the congregation and the architects, and with happy results.

The shape of 1,200-square-foot cedar-wrapped chapel is not a simple rectangular box.

The roof folds down to form a simple entrance framed by a water diversion of zinc-coated copper. Because of the twisting roof, the cornice and the ground plane are far from parallel; the main facade rises from the human-scale entrance to full-height at the altar end, creating an optically illusionistic rhomboid.

The row of 10 windows does not climb to echo the rising roof line, although the openings become narrower as they march toward the taller end. It's hardly noticeable, but this kind of subtle shaping of perspective makes for a strong and constantly changing composition. In lesser hands this would be just a row of windows. In a reversal of usual practice, the windows do not soar but touch the ground, allowing for more varied natural illumination.

Inside, the narrowing window openings are unusually deep — a Leski/Bardt signature detail — quietly changing the light as one moves through the space. There are no stained glass windows here, but the manipulation of light creates an aura of mystery. A skylight inserted between wall and roof at the altar end further heightens this sense of the supernatural. This hidden light source is a simple, dramatic device that injects a little Italian Baroque into American Protestantism.

In designing their first church, the architects tried to balance the practical needs of the congregation with explorations of the spiritual. They imagined the building as an endless spiral. The floor and ceiling and tapering, slightly pitched walls — built of cedar and Brazilian mahogany — form a continuous container, almost as if the church interior was a wooden bowl made on a lathe. These details are as thoughtful as they are understated: not obvious, they play on the subconscious and offer a slight tension perhaps necessary when contemplating the metaphysical.

The children's chapel is only a part of a master plan that someday may include a larger main sanctuary. In the meantime, one suspects the congregation will use this space more and more. Without fanfare, and without spending a fortune, the church became a patron of good architecture. And, because of their desire to create a sacred space, the architects gave Shepherd of the Valley Church a real treasure.

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