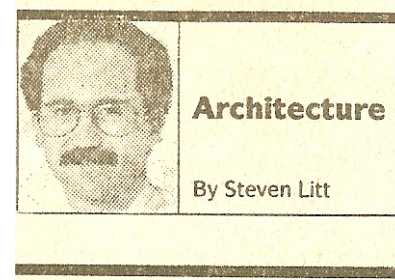


St. Raphael's melds ideas of past with technological prowess

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The congregation at St. Raphael's could have taken the easy way out.

When they built their new sanctuary, they could have ordered an architect to create something a la Williamsburg, like so many other churches in Raleigh.

Instead, St. Raphael's hired a Washington firm, Smith & Segretti, and gave them the freedom to try something new. And now, as a result, Raleigh has its first major post modern church - a religious edifice that blends time-honored ideas from the past with the technological prowess of the present.

To be precise, the building is called Saint Raphael the Archangel Church. It's a 12,000-squarefoot sanctuary for one of the largest Roman Catholic parishes in the state.

The building, at 5801 Falls of the Neuse Road, is a powerful new presence along one of Raleigh's most heavily traveled thoroughfares. It replaces a smaller, more bland sanctuary designed in 1966 by Holloway & Reeves, a Raleigh firm.

In form, the exterior of the new building resembles a Gothic cathedral with its high, narrow, gabled roof. It lacks only the twin bell towers that would complete the image.

The aura of the architectural and religious past subtly pervades the entire building and gives it an Old World flavor.

Although many of the region's protestant churches look back to English, Colonial and 19th-century American precedents, St. Raphael's recalls the Gothic and early Renaissance churches of Italy, and other Continental churches. This is appropriate because the church's 1,000-family parish is largely made up of newcomers to North Carolina with Polish, Irish, German and Italian roots.

The most dramatic sign of the Old World influence is the facade that greets visitors as they move along the church's main driveway. Technically, this is the back side of the sanctuary. But it echoes the facades of churches in Italian hill towns like Orvieto, Perugia or Siena, where the churches dominate major city squares or streets.

The focal elements of St. Raphael's facade are the tall vertical windows that rise from the brick base of the building to the peak of the gabled roof. These windows will be filled with stained glass as soon as the church's budget allows.

Everything about this facade suggests the kind of architectural crescendo that takes place at the entry of a building. But the building's main entry is around the corner.

Church architect Robert Smith of Smith & Segretti, said he intentionally drew on precedents in the design of the rear face of the church. He wanted to avoid having it look like the rear.

"I didn't want to have people get the feeling that when they are coming to church, they had to go around back to get to the front entrance," he said.

He succeeded except for one glitch. Smith was not able to conceal the cooling tower for the building's air conditioning system, roughly 8-feet high, which sits outside the rear of the sanctuary. It's an eyesore.

The shiny metal cooling tower sits in the middle of the climactic composition Smith worked so hard to create. To conceal the machinery would have cost \$50,000. And that was \$50,000 St. Raphael's didn't have after it spent \$3.5 million on the sanctuary project, Smith said. To ameliorate the problem, the church has planted a screen of bushes around the cooling tower.

If the exterior of the sanctuary suggests the image of a Gothic or early Renaissance church, the interior provides a stunning contrast.

Instead of the classic Roman Catholic church plan - based on the Latin cross - the sanctuary is shaped like a shallow amphitheater.

The center of the sanctuary, with its green Italian marble floor, is the understated heart of the structure. The curving rows of pews in the room slope gently down to the rectangular sanctuary center, where the priest can celebrate Mass facing the congregation on three sides. The feeling of this part of the building is almost electric, because all sight lines converge on the altar and the nearby pulpit. The building is very much a post-Vatican II structure.

Above the sanctuary is the huge, tentlike roof structure, with massive steel beams that span a column-free space 100 feet wide by 120 feet long.

Again, Smith has departed from tradition. In the classic Gothic cathedral, the architect and an army of artists and artisans would have lavished attention on every detail of the building - from the complex groins far overhead to the flying buttresses below, the rose window and the soaring bell towers. Above all else, the architecture called attention to the structural forces at play in the building.

Smith, however, said he didn't want the building to grab attention in and of itself. Thus, he designed the interior as a backdrop for liturgical drama - not the focus. He didn't believe that dramatizing the engineering of the roof was a way to enhance the religious atmosphere of the interior.

Before the age of literacy, sculpture, stained glass, and architecture itself, were viewed as ways to communicate the Gospel. The old churches of Europe thus became stunning works of art.

But both Smith and the Rev. Gerald Lewis of St. Raphael's said they viewed the sanctuary of St. Raphael's as an entity that becomes complete only when it is occupied by the congregants. The architecture, they said, is there to enhance the spirit of religious gathering - not to take on a separate significance.

In this, St. Raphael's matches the spirit of other new churches in Raleigh, including St. Giles Presbyterian Church by Harwell Hamilton Harris of Raleigh and St. Mark's Episcopal Church by Edward A. Sovik of Northfield, Minn. (Sovik was a consultant on the St. Raphael's project before Smith & Segretti was hired.) In these churches, as well as St. Raphael's, the sanctuaries were treated as austere settings for worship.

St. Raphael's has plenty of handsome touches, from the microphones hidden in the granite altar and the wooden pulpit to the small window bands alongside the sanctuary facing Falls of the Neuse Road. These windows give the parishioners sliver views trees and sky, without letting them see the cars whizzing past.

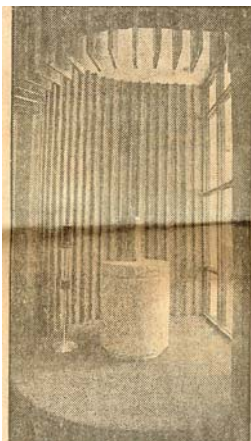
But there are less than optimal aspects of the sanctuary as well. The windows of the clerestory admit shafts of sunlight that will rake across the congregation. And the sanctuary has an awkward relationship to the original Holloway & Reeves structures next door.

Most disturbing is the building's site. Because the church is located next to an urban highway, it shares frontage with shopping centers and fast-food restaurants. Secular squalor doesn't enhance the effort to create a sacred atmosphere.

There is hope for improvement of the relation of the sanctuary to its neighboring church buildings. St. Raphael's master plan calls for a new chapel, a bell tower and a cloisterlike arcade that should tie the church's three main buildings into a more pleasing ensemble. Additional landscaping along Falls of the Neuse Road also could improve the church's relationship to the street.

The new sanctuary, for all its strengths, is probably not the kind of building to attract rave reviews. It lacks, for example, the suave assurance and beautifully understated elegance of Harris' design for the complex at St. Giles Church.

But St. Raphael's is a solid achievement that should serve its members well. And with its postmodern leanings, the building is one more sign that Raleigh's architectural clients - including churches -- are becoming more sophisticated. Instead of restricting the creativity of their architect, the parishioners wisely allowed Smith to exercise his talents.



Inside the church is strictly post-Vatican II, from the baptismal font to the tentlike roof