North Christian Church: A Design Analysis

INTRODUCTION

“...they should feel they are all in unity and harmony in a special and appropriate spiritual atmosphere.”

- Eero Saarinen, on North Christian Church (1960)

In this assignment, students were asked to write a summary of the Columbus, IN architectural tour by analyzing the key features, principals, and functions of a building of their choice. The North Christian Church, designed by Eero Saarinen in 1961, caught my attention for its unique, curious design and the ways by which its design literally and figuratively correlates to its function.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Completed in 1964, the North Central Church was constructed at the request of J. Irwin Miller. The design was intended to be “clear and logical,” effectively accommodating the needs of its parishioners. The central form of the church consists of its planes growing organically into the spire. The church’s simple structure and recessed exterior glass walls create the appearance of the church “hovering over the ground.” While the building is hexagonal, it is elongated on the east-west axis. The slate roof is pyramidal. The steel in the building’s legs lies beneath a layer of lead-coated copper. The legs converge and rise to a central spire (192 ft. high). The spire is topped by a 5-foot “gold-leaf” cross. The church has two stories, the upper of which rests on a concrete base. A landscaped 6-ft. berm mantles the lower level. The sanctuary and chapel are located above ground, and are encompassed by an ambulatory. The basement consists of maintenance and upkeep facilities, classrooms, offices, and an auditorium located directly under the sanctuary.

SYMBOLISM

Parishioners are meant to ascend from the parking lot and then descend as they reach the building, symbolizing a “spiritual journey.” The descent continues on the steps inside leading to the sanctuary. Each level of the church follows the same hexagonal plan. The main entrance leads into the vestibule, which pours into the “bowl-shaped” sanctuary. The sanctuary is located at the center of the church and is elevated to emphasize its liturgical importance. A communion table seating twelve is situated in the
middle of the sanctuary. The places at the table are arranged in two rows and there is a taller place at the head, representing Christ and the Twelve Apostles. Theatrical light shines on the sanctuary. At the base of the spire a hexagonal skylight brightens the communion table with natural light. The ceiling of the sanctuary appears to float due to the cascade of natural light from ambulatory windows along the sanctuary’s perimeter.

Many geometric symbols meant to convey spiritual meaning were also incorporated into the design. Hexagonal figures represent the Star of David. The church’s spire represents a “reaching upward to God,” functioning as axis mundi (the connection between Heaven and Earth). The cross represents Christianity’s emergence from Judaism through Christ’s sacrifice.

CONCLUSION

Saarinen not only balances form with function, but incorporates symbolic representations of the church’s function. Upon entering the church, parishioners are reminded of the importance of their being in the presence of God and their purpose for worshipping in the facility. All elements of the building serve their desired physical purpose while at the same time reflecting the deeper meaning for which the church was constructed.
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