



Image Credit:
Martin Schwartz

University Reformed Church

Now, Harvest Mission Community Church

1001 EAST HURON STREET

ARCHITECT:

Gunnar Birkerts (Birkerts & Straub), 1964

Martin Schwartz

The University Reformed Church is not really on campus, but nearly so: it's just across the street at the northern edge of the main campus. But its quality and location within sight of the other two, best post-World War 2 campus buildings, the Power Center (Roche and Dinkeloo) and the Alumni Association building (Hugh Newell Jacobsen) justify its inclusion in

this survey. This ensemble, accompanied by the dignified Rackham School of Graduate Studies (Smith Hinchman and Grylls, 1938), suggests how much the University could have achieved in campus architecture and planning in the late twentieth century, but didn't.

The University Reformed Church—in its original form—was direct and minimal

in the sense that there are no hidden materials or layers of materials. The concrete you see on the outside is the concrete you see inside. Those walls are structure, they define space, they diffuse daylight. The Church is a rethinking of the composition of planes that Birkerts explored in his earlier, unbuilt Albion Church project. At the URC, the planes are differentiated with reference to the varying roles they play as walls or beams. The stepped concrete planes establish symmetrical systems of east and west walls. As cold as the building might seem from the exterior, the interior was warmed by wood pews and paneling, daylight, and warm, incandescent electric light. Daylight entered where wall planes or beams are held apart. The spaces between the planes were glazed to become windows and skylights, enabling the planes to see daylight, and to reflect and diffuse it before it reaches the congregation. Concrete is touched by light; wood is touched by the congregants.

The composition is a simple rectangle in plan, but highly articulated in section so that a nave and side aisles are defined by the cut-out planes, skylights, and zones of light between layered planes: it is a version of a basilica. The south elevation, the street front, suggests the symmetry of the aisles and seating, but the altar just inside of that plane is asymmetrical. The east half was a 10-foot-high wood panel, which formed a background for the lectern. At the west side, the panel dropped to become seating for participants in the worship service. The two halves were reunited by a cross that rose upward from the very center of the altarpiece. A central skylight delineating the long axis in the sanctuary and shown in an early, rendered section-perspective drawing, was deleted prior to construction. This move, to bring light from the perimeter rather than along the center, contributes to the quiet unity of the space and maximizes the wonderfully unlikely perception that daylight somehow emanates from the thick, concrete walls. Short but deep concrete cross beams (stiffeners) at the exterior are seen on the long elevations to provide a

strong rhythm and diffuse daylight into the skylights.

There are only subtle cues from the street as to the use of this building. There is a cross implied by the concrete formwork on the south façade, but you have to look for it. The building is introverted: the Church is a world apart and this effect is heightened by the austere, rectilinear planes of concrete and lack of conventional symbols. But ecclesiastical structures are commonly introverted. The internal focus on the sacred is secured by the elimination of street noise and views.

A few years ago, the University Reformed Church became the Harvest Mission Community Church and this is the reason that parts of this essay are written in the past tense; things have changed. When I last visited, the structure and space were intact. But the wood pews are gone, replaced by individual seating, the wood altar elements have disappeared. The skylights were obscured, somehow blacked out, and been superseded by electric, theatrical lighting suspended from light metal support trusses that cross the space. The now dark room has the appearance of a nightclub, a perhaps more fitting ambience for a young, contemporary spiritual experience. But I am not convinced: Let the sunshine in. ■

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