

Saints Preserve Us: A Timely Addition

Church of St. Stephen Martyr's New Rectory

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Modesty can be a becoming trait in architecture, but by definition is not one that attracts much attention or praise—in criticism the phrase "a modest achievement" is often mistakenly perceived as a put-down. And yet there are places where this seems precisely the right kind of achievement.

The rectory recently added to the Church of St. Stephen Martyr is a good example. One hardly notices the new building when driving or even walking by, but that's okay. The church itself is the hero of its little corner of the world—the southeast corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 25th Street NW—and the rectory, sympathetic in scale and materials, reinforces this clear impression. Modesty is all the more appealing, of course, if backed by substance. Here, that literally is the case. Behind the polite facade, the Washington firm of Smith Blackburn Stauffer Architects managed inventively to fit a lot into a tight little urban site. As a result, in addition to affirming its proper, secondary place in this particular urban hierarchy, the building economically—and dramatically—improves conditions for all users of the church.

The rectory also calls timely new attention to the church building. Designed by the Washington firm of Johnson & Boutin and completed in 1961, St. Stephen's is notable for its free-standing concrete bell tower, its concrete-framed parabolic arched facade that frames an exceptional "great portal window" of chipped colored glass imported from France, the polychrome ceramic statue of Saint Stephen by sculptor Felix de Weldon, and especially the sanctuary formed with a succession of fluid parabolic vaults.

This is a modest achievement of another sort entirely—that is, it's a local variant of international architectural currents of the post-World War II era. It's a minor piece, to be sure, taking a little of this and that from here and there—the engineering expressionism of Pier Luigi Nervi and others, the "brutalism" of late Le Corbusier, the simple asymmetries of 1950's commercial modernism. But in its way, at this particular location, it's a fine building.

More to the point, it's representative of a slew of aging modernist buildings of the kind many historic preservationists love to hate. As historic landmarks of the not-too-distant future, however, such buildings will require empathy and protection from historic preservationists.

This ironic state of affairs has a fairly straightforward explanation: In its disdain for history, modernist architecture was the willing accomplice of speculative real estate investors, planning bureaucrats and others—even church deacons—who raced to erase the old in favor of the new. The 1961 St. Stephen's building, for instance, replaced an 1867 church building designed by Adolph Cluss, the city's most notable architect of the post-Civil War period (the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building is his, as are Franklin School and Eastern Market). Likewise, the 1993 rectory replaced a much altered Cluss

building, also a rectory, on the site.

When researching the history and legal status of the Cluss rectory, architect John Blackburn was advised by one preservationist to "save the Cluss building and tear down the church." The revealing joke makes the point: In order for buildings of quality and a certain age, such as St. Stephen's, to get needed help in the future a big attitudinal change—in fact a reversal—will have to occur within the historic preservation establishment.

It should be emphasized that in the case of St. Stephen's the worst case scenario of demolition is entirely theoretical. The church fathers have no intention of taking down their monument. To the contrary,

having completed the new rectory, they're ready to start raising money to pay for renovations of the 1961 building. In the meantime, parishioners and priests alike are busy enjoying the benefits of the new addition. "I still feel like I've died and gone to Heaven," quips the Rev. M. Valentine Keveny, who moved into his new digs a few months ago.

Quite apart from the improved living and working conditions produced by the new building, the decision to replace the Cluss rectory seems justified—an appendage to a building that no longer existed, shorn of its picturesque top floor, the only 19th century structure to remain on its block, it was an isolated relic. But the functional inadequacies of the old building were also significant, Blackburn explains: It was poorly aligned with the church, there were no exterior or interior spaces for communal gatherings after services, residential accommodations were meager, and access for disabled and elderly people was next to impossible.

Thanks to intelligent interior arrangements, all of this has changed. Church offices, community rooms and a skylit gallery were commodiously squeezed into the basement. At ground level there are offices, a reception area, a separate lobby for residential access and even a "traditional Catholic parlor where you come when you want to talk about getting married or something like that," in the apt description of parishioner Jack Davin. Residential suites with communal dining rooms occupy the upper two floors. Natural light is plentiful: At the heart of the little building is a full-height courtyard open to the sky.

A passerby can get a glimpse of this excellent little court through an entry gate with a metal replica of the church's parabolic portal—a nice touch. The off-center entryway, emphasized vertically by balconies and generic rooftop gable, is the distinguishing feature of the new facade. It is of course possible to ask for something more than mere deference from "background" buildings such as this—qualities of subtle individuality and contrast—and by this standard the new rectory is not altogether fulfilling. But far better than the Cluss building does the new one complement the semi-heroic 1961 church. Modestly, it extends an urban composition that's worth treasuring.



The new rectory abuts the 1961 Church of St. Stephen Martyr.