

The Art and Architecture of Christ the King

Our congregation enjoys a variety of artworks that enrich our worship space and we understand that art, like music, is a Biblically validated worship element. Although we see them every week, many of us may not be aware of the stories behind these art pieces. This article and those that follow in a planned series might help us appreciate our worship surroundings a bit better, and help us remember to worship with our best offerings and gifts.

Before considering the furnishings and art work in the sanctuary at Christ the King, we should consider the design of the building itself, an award-winning classic work of mid-century northwest modern architecture. Built in 1956, the building was designed by the firm of Grant, Copeland and Chervenak, who also designed Pilgrim Lutheran Church in downtown Bellevue, built the previous year. The firm, a partnership of University of Washington graduates Austin Grant, Ross Copeland and Robert Chervenak, made “a significant impact on the built environment in the Seattle area” in the fifties. They specialized in religious structures and designed a number of award winning projects.

Robert A. Chervenak’s design for The Lutheran Church of Christ the King was cited by the New York Architecture League for achievement in the Religion category of the 1960 National Gold Medal Exposition of the Building Arts. Also listed in the citation were Stem & Towne, mechanical engineers; Howard E. Johnson, electrical engineer; Ernest Schwidder, sculptor; and Irene McGowan, designer for electrical fixtures.

Photos of the church as it looked in 1956 are included in the University of Washington Libraries Photo Collection 251. They show the strong asymmetrical roof lines we still recognize, but include buttressed timbers extending the line of interior beams, anchoring the hillside building on both the east and west sides. The roof line was opposed by a cantilevered roof over the main entry, which is now the sacristy entry at the south end. The exterior was sheathed in redwood stained cedar with white trim and an unpainted concrete block west wall. It featured three large white crosses: on the north and south walls, and attached to a tall brick chimney on the south end of the building. The sanctuary design was starkly modern and minimalist. The chancel was at the north end, lit by a floor to roof line skylight on the east wall. The redwood stained cedar elements were echoed in a partial wall and the pulpit and font bases, as well as the color of the Christus Rex sculpture. The simple stained glass windows on the west side added color to what was otherwise a black, white and neutral interior: black cross, communion rail, window trim, altar base and surround, candle holders and folding chairs; white walls and altar front; black and white tile flooring; neutral light fixtures, ceiling and carpeting in the chancel and aisle. Wall mounted flower vases, a hanging eternal light holder and the cover of the font established the use of copper appointments. The next article in the series will examine the changes to the building since the sixties.

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