

The Importance of Religious Symbolism in Architecture

Case Study: Martin Luther College - Chapel of the Christ

Last Edited September 2021



SYNOPSIS

At the heart of Christian faith is the Church, and at the heart of the Martin Luther College campus is their Chapel, physically and spiritually. Expressed volumetrically as a soaring cross within an octagonal form, the design of Martin Luther College's Chapel of the Christ is profoundly symbolic.

SYMBOLISM AT CHAPEL OF THE CHRIST

Buildings that connect the human experience to faith are special places. Accomplished 'architecture' works on many levels of perception simultaneously to offer a richer experience to the occupant. Religious architecture offers a unique opportunity to inspire, lift spirits, and subtly teach the faithful, and those seeking faith.

An eight-sided form is revered in Christian church design, symbolic in that the eighth day is Sunday – a sacred day outside our earthly week. Likewise, the abstraction of a cross is a very powerful symbol in Christianity, where the Altar is placed at the head of the cross, completing the important main axis of The Chapel of the Christ, just as Christ is the head of the church. The congregation makes up the body of the chapel, literally and symbolically, as it occupies both sides of the main axis.

Another level of symbolism is evident in the relationship among Baptismal Font, Altar, and Crucifix. We reinforced the connection of these three in their perfect alignment along the main axis of the chapel. As the Baptismal Font represents the Rite of Christian initiation or "entering into" the church, it is therefore placed at the physical entrance





*Entrance to Sanctuary with Baptismal Font



*Front of Sanctuary with the altar and crucifix

to the chapel, inviting all to remember their own Baptism in Christ. Looking ahead, one views the Altar, as it symbolizes the table on which spiritual food – The Body and Blood of Christ are presented to the faithful. The Altar is positioned directly below the Crucifix, lifted high in the chapel as a symbol of both the Death and Resurrection of Christ.

Symbolism is incorporated in the Chapel's exterior as well. An abstraction of the cross is evident at the main entrance, where the upper middle window and tall thin window between the entrance doors are bisected with an engraved stone lintel. This cross is subtle, but once one knows it is there, one always sees it.

Other symbols include Latin inscriptions, called "Solus" which were described to us by the building committee. We as architects were charged with creating the harmonious placement for these important inscriptions at the principal elevations of the chapel. The soaring facades frame the inscriptions in a vertical format, where they are etched in stone within the brick and glass compositions.

- At the main north entrance it reads: *Solus Christus* (Latin: "Christ alone"), which is one of the five solas that summarize the Protestant Reformers' basic belief "that salvation is through Christ alone and that Christ is the only mediator between God and man".
- At the west entrance it reads: *Sola Gratia* (Latin: "by grace alone") which is also one of the five solas.
- At the east it reads: *Sola Fide* (Latin: "by faith alone"), also historically known as "the doctrine of justification by faith".
- At the south it reads: *Sola Scriptura* (Latin: "by scripture alone") which is the doctrine that "the Bible is the only infallible and inerrant authority for Christian faith, and that it contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. Sola scriptura was a foundational doctrinal principle of the Protestant Reformation held by the Reformers and is a formal principle of Protestantism today."

CONSIDERATIONS DURING THE DESIGN PROCESS



THERE ARE FOUR MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS THAT INFLUENCED THE DESIGN OF THE MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE CHAPEL OF THE CHRIST:

SITE AND ITS
CONTEXT

PROGRAM

BUDGET

MISSION,
VISION +
VALUES

The College had already identified a site, a most appropriate location for the chapel, at the confluence of two major campus axes. We as architects certainly agreed with the building committee's thoughtful selection, seeking to optimize the chapel's positioning on this site.

Next, the building committee's program described what spaces are needed in the chapel, their size, location, and proximity to other spaces, as well as necessary and desired features of each. With this project, the most important space is the worship space, and its influences were both liturgical (worship) and musical. Next, the client's budget must be in line with the program,

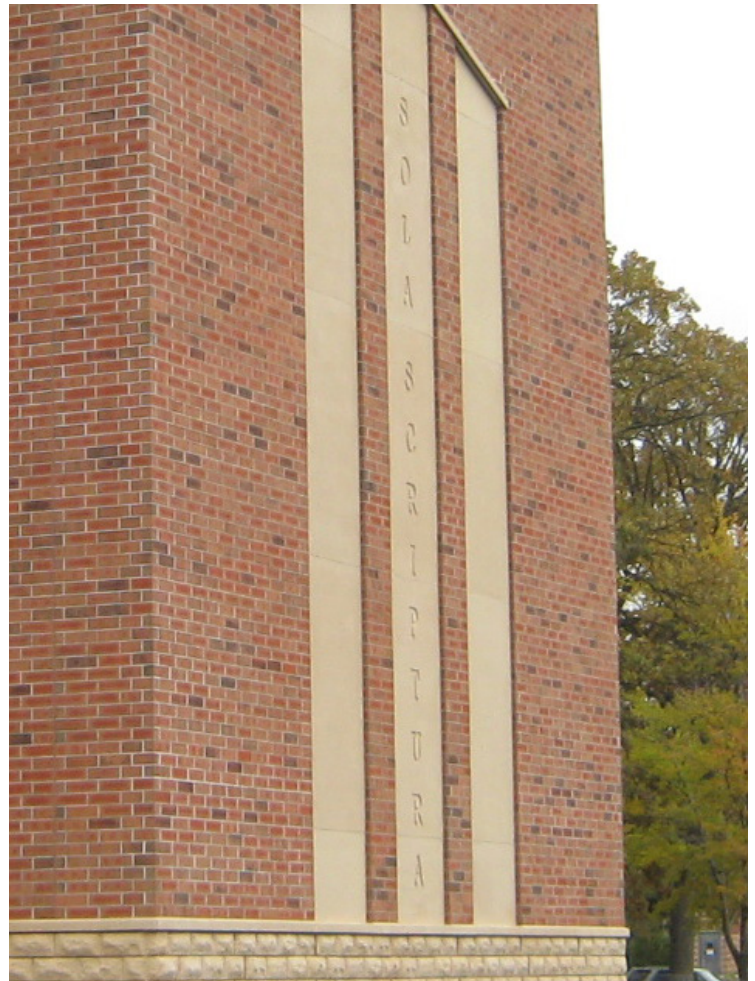
which has an impact on the design quality of the spaces. The more grand the design, the more it will cost per square foot. The bigger the volumes – height of the chapel for example, the more it will cost as well.

Design complexity with multiple roof forms and long distances between support columns also adds to the cost. Guiding all decisions of program and budget, the client's mission, vision and values must be wholly integrated before pencil is ever put to paper. Here, the vision for the Chapel of the Christ is for it to become the physical and spiritual heart of the campus. The building committee sought a reverently-designed chapel that

appears as if it had always been there, an integral part of the historic context. It should also be easily understood as the most important building on campus. Finally, the Chapel's architectural expression must be easily identifiable as not simply a Christian worship space, but as the foremost symbol of Martin Luther College's church body - the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

BASIS OF THE CHAPEL DESIGN

In reiterating the point that the Chapel of the Christ is designed as if it had always been there, we carefully studied the existing campus architecture – its style, proportions, materials and forms, place-making and positioning, sense of arrival and hierarchy. Understanding the campus informed our design so that it would fit in contextually, but also soar above, and strive to be the most important and inspired architecture on campus. In addition, we looked at other important Lutheran church designs in Europe, especially Germany, where Martin Luther's Protestant movement originated. While it was never the intent to copy the past, it was always important to capture the sense of awe, and uplifting quality of spiritually-centered historical architecture.



DETERMINING THE LAYOUT OF A CHURCH

The axial relationship of the Altar and Baptismal Font is the starting point. The structural design is integral to this relationship, giving form and describing the size and volume of the worship space. Martin Luther College's Chapel of the Christ is designed for nearly 1,200 worshippers and choir members. In designing a church's layout, every worshipper should have clear lines-of-sight to the Altar as well as the Ambo (pulpit) where the Word is proclaimed, the Crucifix, and the Triptych (three-part painting), centrally located behind the Altar. These should be placed prominently, often on a platform.

At the Chapel of the Christ, this composition resides on a platform five steps up, visible by all in the congregation. The lines-of-sight are not encumbered by columns or other obstructions. The congregation wraps around the platform, keeping distances within 75 feet. Another key influence in designing a church's layout is the location of the choir and

pipe organ. Acoustically, music "sings" best in the long direction of a space, much better than from the short direction. Also, the choir performs best when the organ is directly behind them. Therefore, the organ and choir should be at the end of the long axis. The church's volume and the pipe organ's size are developed together.



At the Chapel of the Christ, 57 ranks of pipes are needed to acoustically enliven the space, and they are predominantly featured in the church's transept – or cross axis. However, musical considerations are to support liturgical considerations and not the other way around. The position and size of the Altar platform as well as the position and size of the pipe organ and choir are carefully studied. The challenge of ensuring that the smaller form, the Altar is not “upstaged” by the much larger form, the

pipe organ, requires a deep understanding of three-dimensional composition and spatial orientation. Here, we focused attention toward the Altar by placing it within the composition of an appropriately scaled sanctuary wall, sometimes called a Reredos. This composition is deliberately placed on the Chapel's shorter axis, bringing the Altar twice as close to the congregation as the organ.

FEATURES OF RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE

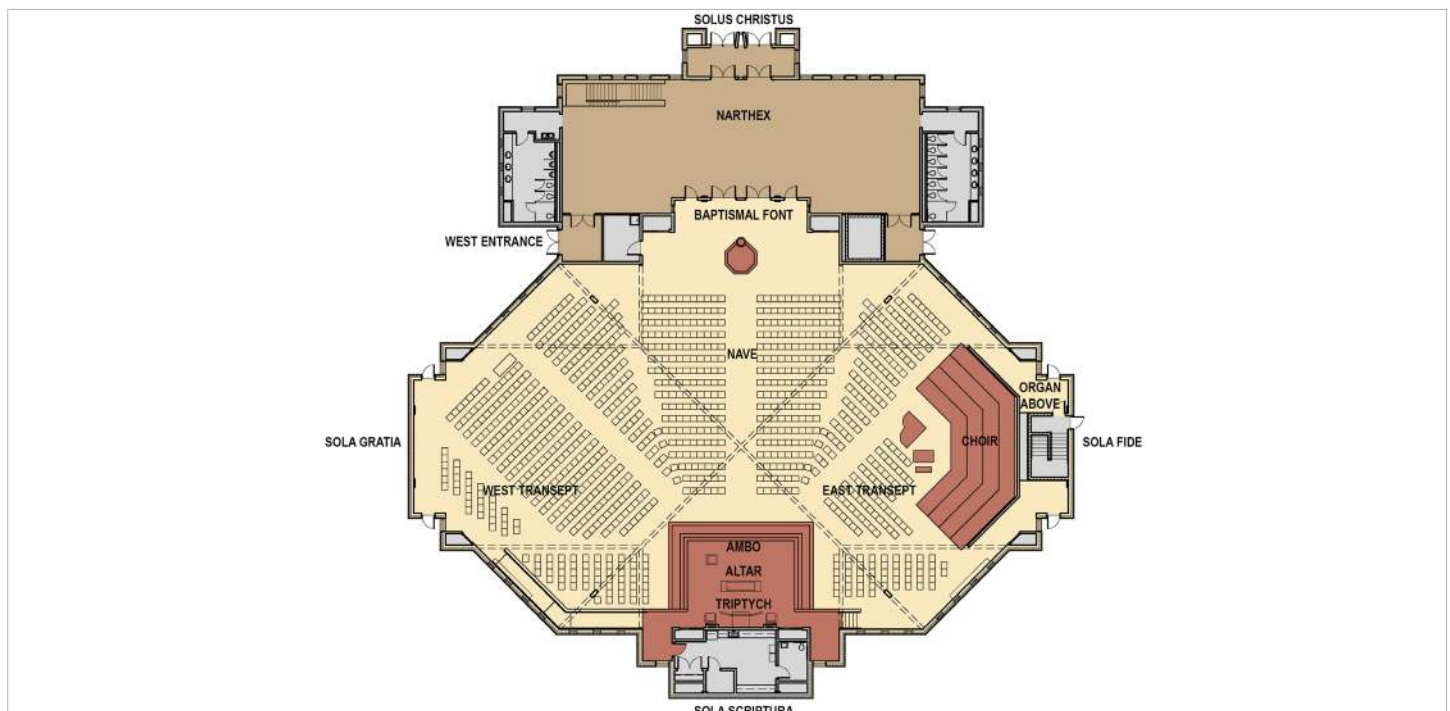
A time-honored design feature in churches is a prominent entrance with large doors, conveying that this is a place of worship, not an ordinary building. The entrance is significant in scale, yet welcoming, expressing the nature of Jesus Christ, a carpenter who worked in the humblest and most tactile of materials, wood.

Additionally, churches typically incorporate a large cross, bell tower or cupola. Martin Luther College embraced the idea of a cupola with a cross together, elevated above all campus buildings. Other significant architectural features are stained glass and rose windows. While The Chapel of the Christ does not currently have stained glass, it is designed to accommodate stained glass in the future. It also has large areas of upper glass in the gabled elevations north and south, east and west. This is a reinterpretation of the rose window, a circular window that typifies Gothic church architecture. Another common architectural feature of churches is the clerestory window – a

window high in the wall beneath the roofline, often extending the length of the wall.

We included clerestory windows at The Chapel of the Christ, and they trace the high walls of the crossing gabled forms. These windows permit diffuse light into the worship space. The very idea of light is important in church design, symbolizing the Light of Christ, whose followers are never in darkness. Light is a terrific building material, and we used it extensively to create a spiritually uplifting sacred space, with an ethereal quality. There is another major architectural component that impacts the design of churches inside and out, and that is structural expression.

As mentioned previously, structure is integral to the worship space layout. A structural concept is often the first set of lines drawn on paper. These early drawings spring to life as massive columns or arches of stone or masonry, vaults and domes.



The more these forms can be translated between interior and exterior, the stronger the design. Here at The Chapel of the Christ, we designed massive wood arches and beams to define the volume. The arches span one hundred feet to intersect in the middle of the worship space, carrying the beams that establish the nave and the transept. This form-giving structure

reads to the exterior, where two gables intersect 62 feet high, supporting the cupola and cross 86 feet above the campus. The soaring composition is breathtaking, an image in the sky inviting students, faculty and community to the new heart of Martin Luther College.



ABOUT PLUNKETT RAYSICH ARCHITECTS, LLP.

PRA is an award-winning Architectural and Interior Design firm dedicated to delivering innovative design solutions. We specialize in projects that comprise the essence of communities—where you live, work, play, learn, worship and retire. We are passionate about turning our clients' aspirations into reality.

The firm consists of 85 staff led by 10 partners, with offices in Milwaukee, WI; Madison, WI; Sarasota, FL, and Austin, TX. Our staff is organized into a studio format to focus resources, experience and creative synergy on client projects. We work together in teams across offices and studios to deliver excellent results for our clients.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JOHN HOLZ AIA, NCARB, LEED AP^{B+C} | Religious, Civic + Sarasota Office

John is a partner with Plunkett Raysich Architects, leading PRA's Sarasota office. He is the designer of Martin Luther College Chapel of the Christ. John has a passion for religious facility design and a deep understanding of their unique characteristics, traditions and symbolism.