Victoria M. Young

Saint John’s Abbey Church: Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 216 pp., 17 color and 80 b/w illus. $34.95, ISBN 9780816676163

Marcel Breuer’s Saint John’s Abbey Church in Collegeville, Minnesota, is one of the few churches in the United States to have merited a previous monograph—Whitney Stoddard’s Adventure in Architecture: Building the New St. John’s, written several years before the church’s dedication in 1961. That Stoddard, a medievalist, was so fascinated with this decidedly modernist landmark suggests much about the building’s positioning at the time. Victoria M. Young’s study of the church’s history and its design now helps us to understand fully why it was so important to its contemporaries. Her own long relationship with the abbey (Young is a professor of architectural history at the nearby University of St. Thomas) shows in her sensitive descriptions of Breuer’s clients, the monks, and her stress on the dynamic relationship between the two, which, she argues, produced a masterpiece neither could have been responsible for alone. She deftly balances architectural history and analysis with an examination of the theology and history of the liturgical movement, creating a multidimensional work that can be read with profit by religious as well as architectural historians.

Young’s first two chapters set Breuer’s commissioning in the context of Benedictine monasticism, the twentieth-century liturgical movement, and midcentury modernist architecture. The Benedictine order, founded in the sixth century AD, has always been known for its innovative architecture and comprehensive community planning. A monastic complex includes a church, housing, spaces for recreation and prayer, and work buildings ranging from barns to schoolrooms. Saint John’s is the largest Benedictine foundation in the United States, established (along with its associated college) during the nineteenth-century migration of German Catholics to the upper Midwest. During the first half of the twentieth century, it also became a major American center for the promotion of liturgical reform within the Catholic Church. While the liturgical movement had many goals, one of its central concerns was the reform of church architecture so as to encourage greater understanding of and participation in the sacraments. Adherents believed that good church design had to be contemporary, not nostalgic or historicist, in order to signify God’s presence in the modern world. While Young overstates the extent to which the Vatican was supportive of the movement toward modern church design, which was highly controversial in both Europe and the United States, she successfully sets Saint John’s in the context of earlier gestures toward modernism in Europe (by Rudolf Schwarz, Dominikus Böhm, Le Corbusier, and others) and the United States (Barry Byrne) and the organized movement to support this trend, as represented by the French journal L’Art Sacré and the American Liturgical Arts.

By 1953, the liturgical movement had gained in popularity, and the abbey was bursting at the seams due to a postwar boom in both monastic vocations and college attendance. Encouraged by monks like Father Cloud Meinberg, an architect and head of Saint John’s art department, the abbey’s leaders decided not only to build a much larger church to replace their 1881 Romanesque revival building but also to engage a well-known architect to create a hundred-year master plan for the entire complex. Accordingly, they contacted twelve European and American modernist architects (nicknamed the “twelve apostles”) to inquire about their interest in the job. Breuer, Walter Gropius, Barry Byrne, Joseph Murphy, and Richard Neutra visited the abbey, but in the end the monks chose Breuer for his combination of “religion, youth, character, and architectural expertise” (63). Breuer, born Jewish, was a Lutheran; while several monks very much wanted a Catholic architect, hence the inclusion of Murphy and Byrne in the pool, the majority believed that the architect’s religious affiliation was less important than his artistic talent and his collaborative ability. Breuer was also younger than many others in the pool, with the energy to complete a number of buildings over a period of years, and had extensive experience in both domestic and large-scale design, attractive to a community that needed both showpiece buildings and living spaces.

Young’s analysis of the design process is encapsulated by her term “spiritual axis,” describing Breuer’s development of a building at the nexus of monastic life, the liturgical reform movement, and modern design. His research process, undertaken in consultation with associate architect Hamilton Smith and the monks, lasted five years, from April 1953 to April 1958, when church construction was approved, and included study of monastic life, sacramental theology, and modern church architecture in Europe and the United States. Young argues that Breuer’s philosophy of design, seeing “space as motion and flow,” cohered with a Christian and Benedictine emphasis on journey and pathways (77). As a result, he developed a plan with a strong central axis. The worshipper approaches the “bell banner,” a massive freestanding form that serves as a threshold between the profane outer world and the sacred interior. She then pauses in the baptistry, a place of sacramental initiation, before making a second transition through a low tunnel and emerging into the vast space and height of the brilliantly lit nave and being drawn forward toward the altar and beyond to the monastic community’s stalls. This axial rhythm accentuates both moments of pilgrimage journey and moments of God’s presence in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Meanwhile, the trapezoidal ground plan balances this axis, unlike the plans of older basilican churches, this modern liturgical plan unifies lay congregation, monastic community, and celebrant. Finally, Young explores a point of tension on the project: Would figural art be an enhancement and aid to worship, or would it distract from Breuer’s sculptural architecture? She chronicles liturgical consultant Frank Kacmarck’s role in commissioning dozens of statues and crosses from contemporary artists in Europe and the United States, including Doris Caesar’s bronze Saint John the Baptist, but she also explores the monks’ controversial decision to commission local artist Bronislaw Bak for an enormous stained glass wall instead of approving Breuer’s preferred design by Josef...
Albers. In conclusion, Young briefly examines several of Breuer's other buildings on the Saint John's campus and the influence of the abbey church on later designs. She discusses the irony that, because the Second Vatican Council established a series of major liturgical changes only a few years after Saint John's opened, a number of the church's features (such as its crypt chapels and communion tables) became irrelevant almost before the concrete had dried.

Modern church design has been a topic of research interest recently, with surveys published by Robert Proctor, Gretchen Buggeln, and Jay M. Price and studies of individual architects by scholars such as Vincent Michael (on Barry Byrne) and Meredith Clausen (on Pietro Belluschi). Young's work, however, is unique in its in-depth attention to the production of a single building against the backdrop of a larger movement. This extreme close-up of a single design and building process illuminates big themes, including liturgical design, relationships between clients and architects, the construction difficulties associated with daring modernist engineering, and interfaith cooperation and conflict. Despite the deep focus, some stories still seem undertold. For example, the contrast between the monks' openness to a non-Catholic architect and their deep concern over the faith affiliations of the artists asked to produce figurative work is intriguing. In the Cold War artistic context, I would have appreciated an exploration of the case of Ben Shahn, who produced sketches for a decorative screen but whose Communist ties proved disqualifying. I also wish Young had found room for a fuller analysis of Breuer's many other buildings for the abbey, though she does give some attention to the spectacular library he located immediately across from the church. Nevertheless, Young's multidimensional attention to Breuer's "spiritual axis" reestablishes Saint John's as a critical monument for the modernist movement and for twentieth-century church design.

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Notes


Robert A. M. Stern and Jimmy Stamp

**Pedagogy and Place: 100 Years of Architectural Education at Yale**

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From the Accademia di San Luca through the École des Beaux-Arts to the creation of accredited schools of architecture in the United States, education has played an influential role in the formation of the architect. As the academy goes, so goes the profession. Judging by its graduates, one of the most influential institutions during the past century has been the Yale School of Architecture. What differentiates it from competitors such as MIT, Harvard, Princeton, Penn, and Columbia? In this brilliant and detailed history, Dean Robert A. M. Stern and Jimmy Stamp offer a comprehensive explanation of Yale's unique qualities and the people, both students and faculty, who have made Yale one of the most revered places to study architecture in the United States.

How much did the members of Yale's faculty and their pedagogy influence the trajectory of American architecture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? The authors claim that Yale was at the forefront of architectural debate and new movements. Yet at the same time they give credit to the students' individual creativity, which the school has sought to foster. Stern defines Yale as a pluralist school within a college of art. From the debates between Paul Rudolph and Louis Kahn to student juries attended by opposites such as Léon Krier and Peter Eisenman, Yale has prided itself on being a place where disparate theories of architecture can be explored. This can be very exciting or very confusing, depending on the student's background. My own experience with the school's pluralist pedagogy in the 1980s was less that all ideas were equal and more that everyone was welcome to get beaten up in the boxing ring.

From its founding under Chairman Everett V. Meeks, Yale's architecture school was modeled on the École des Beaux-Arts. Unlike at MIT and Columbia, architecture at Yale was part of a school of fine arts, and this meant cross-pollination from painting, sculpture, and photography. This may also be the genesis of Yale's reputation as an "artsy" (some would say undisciplined) architecture school. Architecture left the School of Art in 1972 while remaining in the Art and Architecture building. In 2000 the School of Art moved out of the A&A, yet some of its ariness has remained in architecture.

Under Deans George Howe and Paul Rudolph in the 1950s, Yale fully embraced modernism and began the "star" system of teaching, in which up-and-coming or famous architects came to Yale on a visiting basis. Rather than emphasizing a particular program of study or a methodology of teaching, as at ITT or the École des Beaux-Arts, Yale emphasized the validity of many styles. The strong personalities of the visiting faculty and the modern jury system encouraged debate and discussion, leading some to describe the result as "talktecture."

Yale has long been associated with leading modernist architects and has produced many internationally known stars, such as Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Charles Gwathmey, James Polshek, David Childs, Marion Weiss, Soo Chan, and Lise Anne Couture. Less well known perhaps is that Yale, more than any other graduate program, has been associated with the major practitioners of eclecticism. The artistic freedom given to students and the emphasis on architectural history are responsible for this. Thus, during the height of modernism, Yale welcomed visiting faculty and deans who questioned architectural orthodoxy and believed in the relevance of history and context. Among these was favored alumnus Eero Saarinen, who was known for his eclectic approach, designing Miesian boxes for General Motors and an expressionistic concrete sculpture for TWA. Philip Johnson, who famously said, "You cannot not know history," visited Yale...