



Marcel Breuer: On Religious Architecture

Author(s): Shirley Reiff Howarth

Source: *Art Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Summer, 1979), pp. 257-260

Published by: [College Art Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/776375>

Accessed: 14/06/2014 22:17

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



College Art Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Art Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Marcel Breuer: On Religious Architecture

SHIRLEY REIFF HOWARTH

From 1961–68, the St. Francis de Sales Church was constructed in Muskegon, Michigan. This expressive and technologically daring structure was designed by Marcel Breuer and Herbert Beckhard using a revolutionary new design concept.

The facade of the church proper is a trapezoid, banner-like shape. The form of the church evolves from the enclosure of its rectangular base by means of side walls, which, as they rise, revolve their plane and twist, each wall becoming a hyperbolic paraboloid. The interior space which is thus created is wide at the rear and narrows to the sanctuary, causing concentration at the altar. The front and rear walls are simple flat planes which lean against the paraboloids. The church is 75 feet high and is topped by a concrete trough which houses the suspended bells.

The exterior surface of the church is architectural concrete. The board pattern of the concrete surface emphasizes the pouring joints and shows a rich textured surface. The bold texture of the warped side walls was created by formwork composed of regular boards of constant dimension distributed on a surface of double curvature.

The interior surfaces combine architectural concrete with dark oak screen walls and pews, waxed brick floors, and rough tooled white granite.

The balcony is a freestanding element in the nave supported and cantilevered by four columns. A rather unusual feature of the sanctuary is the Chapel for the Blessed Sacrament, which is elevated from the sanctuary level so that it may be seen from all points.

The following is the transcript of an interview with Marcel Breuer on November 21, 1977, conducted in preparation for an exhibition at the Hackley Art Museum, Muskegon, Michigan

(May 25–July 12); Grand Rapids Art Museum (Aug. 16–Sept. 17); Kresge Art Gallery, Michigan State University, Lansing (Sept. 25–Oct. 22); and Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (Oct. 29–Dec. 3) in 1978.

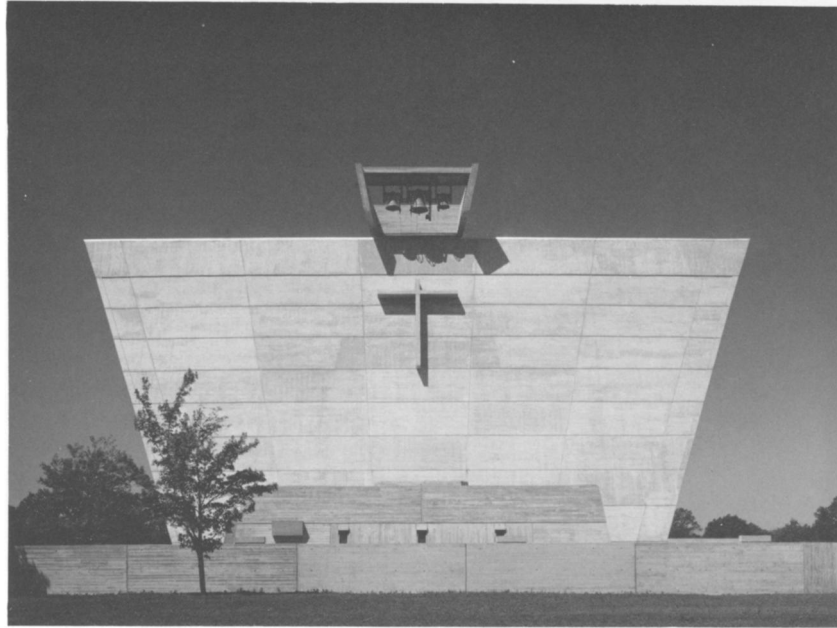
Howarth: When was the first time you used the theory or the principle of the hyperbolic paraboloid in a building?

Breuer: As you know, the hyperbolic paraboloids are used in the St. Francis de Sales Church for enclosure and not for structural support. Now, this is the first time that they have been used for enclosure—they were never used in this manner before. However, hyperbolic paraboloids have been used in structure before. An example of this is in the Hunter College Library in New York. There, umbrella columns are created by four hyperbolic parabolas and then these umbrellas are leaning against each other. But in the St. Francis, the hyperbolic paraboloids are side walls and they are really enclosures and purely for space and form reasons—this was not done before.

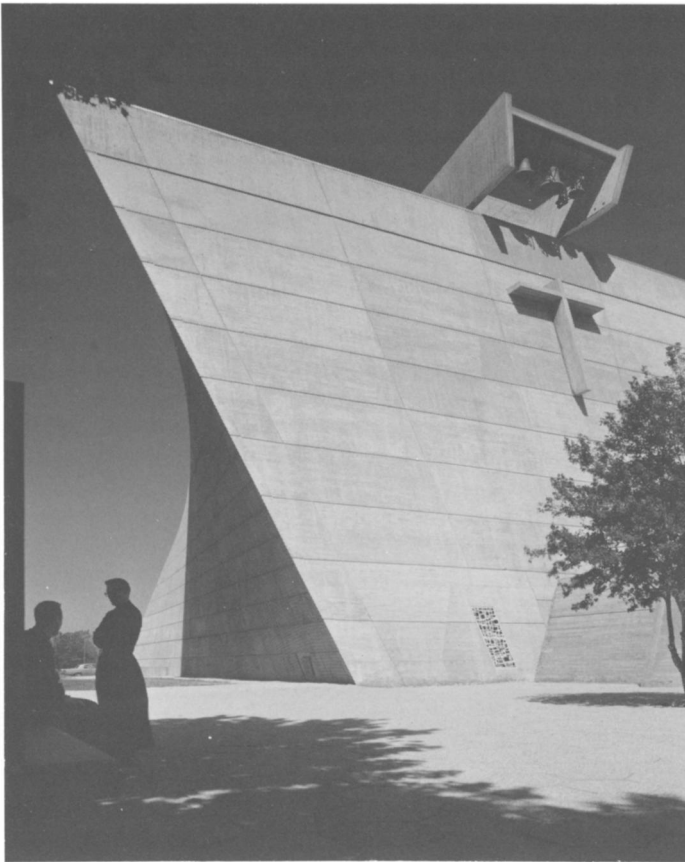
Howarth: Where did you get the idea to use this form? Did it evolve from your work on the St. John's Abbey Church in Minnesota?

Breuer: Where does anyone get ideas?

Howarth: You have great sensitivity for materials. The materials you use are an integral part of your structures. Do you have an aesthetic for materials or a philosophy for their use? In the St. Francis, did you have a specific meaning for the materials which you used?



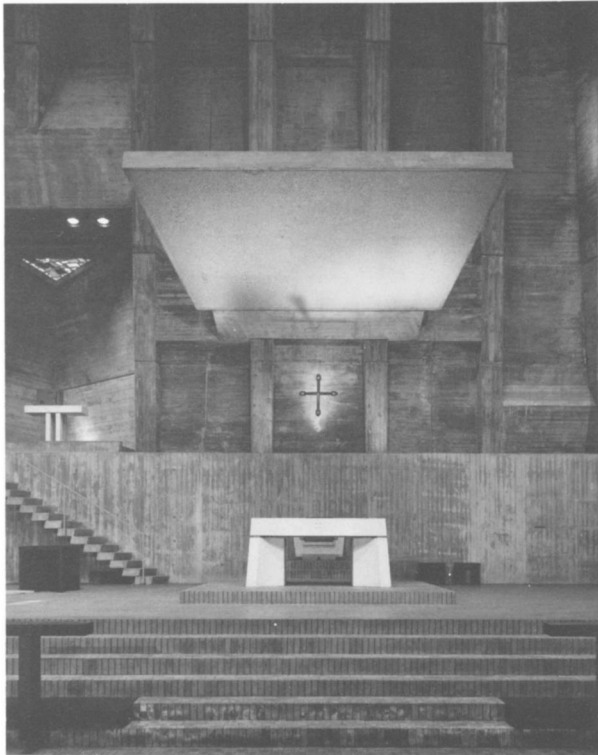
St. Francis de Sales Church, Muskegon, Michigan, 1961–68. East elevation. Marcel Breuer and Herbert Beckhard, architects.



Southeast corner of Church from inside Atrium walls.



Interior looking toward sanctuary from balcony.



Interior elevation looking toward sanctuary, showing communion tables, president's seat (as seen through the altar), baldachin, and Blessed Sacrament Chapel.



Structural supports of balcony with access stair.



Detail showing texture of hyperbolic paraboloid walls.

Breuer: If you mean a symbolic meaning, NO. The *form* of the church, that is a different thing, but not the materials. The form, as a structural enclosure of the space which is the church, develops into a kind of banner, but this is form, this is not the materials. Of course, it *would* be difficult to make it in any other material than concrete. These things all hang together—you would have to divorce them and then say which is the papa and which is the mama.

Howarth: It is not a conscious decision then?

Breuer: No.

Howarth: In the St. Francis Church, you have used stained glass very sparingly. Were you using it symbolically or aesthetically?

Breuer: Purely aesthetically.

Howarth: Do the unique qualities of certain materials inspire a concept or do you create the concept first and then match materials to it?

Breuer: They go completely hand in hand. Sometimes even without the building, certain possibilities of materials engage my thoughts so that I have them ready when a building is about to be built in these materials. Very often this worked out in connection with the building—this is what happened in the Muskegon church. It was the concrete enclosure in hyperbolic paraboloids which had been in my mind earlier.

SUMMER 1979

Howarth: I feel it is an extremely successful concept and that the church is very effective.

Breuer: Yes, I also like the church. Unfortunately I don't think that either of these churches, especially the Muskegon church have been given the attention they should have. I think I say this rather immodestly.

Howarth: I also feel that way. That is the reason I had wanted to organize this exhibition.

How important is the site to you when you create a building? Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Guggenheim to be in Central Park; however, it was not built there, it was built on a city street. How detrimental can a bad site be?

Breuer: Well, neither of these churches is very dependent on the site. Both are on flat ground. Sometimes I think the site has a much greater effect on a building than other times.

259

But I think it also depends on where a building is. You see the St. John's Abbey is way out in Minnesota and Muskegon is not in the center of the world. If it were in New York, or Paris, or Washington or somewhere in a more frequented place, the attention would be much greater.

Howarth: The front facade, the trapezoidal banner shape, reminds me of a medieval or a crusader's shield with the cross on it. I think of it as an impregnable fortress shielding the faithful. Is this a legitimate interpretation? Or did you mean it to symbolize something else?

Breuer: I did not think of that. What I really wanted to do earlier in the St. John's Abbey was to create a banner, a kind of banner which is carried in a procession, and have it develop out of the building so that this banner is not a special tower or a special structure as it is in most churches. However, I did not get the idea at that time, so I made a special structure but involved it into the functions of the church. You go through it like an arch to get into the church, and of course it carries the bells and that is an old function which is taken over there and then as a silhouette of the church, as a characteristic shape. In Muskegon, I think I went a little further with this idea of developing the banner out of the structure of the church. And that was the real idea of this entrance facade.

Howarth: Is space a solid architectural form to you or is it a living, breathing thing which you enclose?

Breuer: It is a hollow thing which is enclosed; a container which results also in certain exterior forms. Those of course can be emphasized, can be observed by the architect. Something special can be done. But in itself, the main thing is the space which is enclosed. Well, let us say that is why you built it.

Howarth: What meaning does space, as an entity, have to you? How do you arrive at the concept of a religious space, as opposed to an office space or an ordinary meeting hall?

Breuer: Yes, that question has been asked of me at various times—especially because I am not a religious man. I have the feeling, and this is not a very clear-cut program or idea, that any space which is larger than necessary and higher than necessary, and in which the structure and the whole building of the space is visible as it is in all churches and this type of architecture, that this space created is simply automatically religious. Of course, there are functional things which a religious building has to fulfill—there is the cloister, the organ, the pews, the acoustics, the concentration, the lighting, and so on—but in itself, I think that any large space which is built so that the process of construction is visible on the inside, is a religious space.

I got this feeling at the very beginning when I came to this country. A friend of mine took me through M.I.T., and at that time M.I.T. was experimenting with electrotechnical elements to exchange the tension between two electric points. I'm sure you have seen photographs of it: there is a cylindrical column with a large ball on top, opposite a smaller column of the same

thing; the electric exchange happens between the two. This is housed in a special little building in M.I.T. which is round and has a spheric dome top. The roof inside is shiny aluminum and the floor is shiny terrazzo. I went in there and I really felt that I was in a church. There was not a soul there, it was quiet, clean; it gave me a very funny feeling—a very religious feeling. That is what I mean. I know that I might have had this feeling in a big hydroelectrical power plant in Switzerland, and we have built a rather large one, the expansion of the Grand Coulee Dam. I have not seen it yet because I cannot travel much, but I think that this must also have that feeling. It is an enormous empty space carried by monumental concrete walls, folded. Everything is dustless and spotless, there is no daylight, only artificial light, there are no people, only the heads of twelve turbines visible, of which *each* produces enough electricity to operate the whole city of Denver.

Well, all this as expression, has very much to do with a religious feeling. The monks at St. John's Abbey used to say, "Breuer is a religious man, only he does not know it."

Howarth: Many of your buildings are quite sculptural. Do you feel that function is the only thing that keeps architecture from becoming sculpture? Or do you consider it a sculptural form?

Breuer: Oh, yes, I think it is very easy to make that comparison because architecture is three-dimensional and sculpture is three-dimensional, and over a certain scale, sculpture has to be constructed and architecture has to be constructed. One of the main differences between the two, is that in architecture you go into it and in sculpture, you stay outside of it. This is not always true, however, because there are sculptors who make sculpture which you can walk into and around—Calder for instance.

Howarth: And some architecture, such as the Egyptian pyramids, which are meant to be observed from the outside and not walked into.

Breuer: The pyramids however are neither architecture *nor* sculpture. They are a symbol, a form. But I have gone into them and the going in was completely different than the form—unlike churches and other buildings where the exterior form has a lot to do with the interior space.

Howarth: What do you think your greatest contribution has been in architecture? What do you feel you will be remembered for?

Breuer: Maybe they will forget me, I don't know.

Howarth: No, that will never happen!

Breuer: Well, I don't know. At periods of my life I have given my attention to various ideas. I don't know what will . . . probably the most trivial of them will be remembered. ■

Shirley Reiff Howarth is Director of the Tampa Museum.