

The Present Situation

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The body, by the place which at each moment it occupies in the universe, indicates the parts and the aspects of matter on which we can lay hold: our perception, which exactly measures our virtual action on things, thus limits itself to the objects which actually influence our organs and prepare our movements. Now let us turn to memory. The function of the body is not to store up recollections, but simply to choose, in order to bring back to distinct consciousness, by the real efficacy thus conferred on it, the useful memory, that which may complete and illuminate the present situation with a view to ultimate action.

—Henri Bergson
Matter and Memory

The best-known building in northwest Arkansas and the most highly and widely acclaimed is a modest chapel in the pleasant if somewhat prosaic setting of a scruffy, even more modest Ozark forest near Eureka Springs. The architect's straightforward, self-described premise of a simple orthogonal volume with gable roof may be understood as essentialist: an intricate singularity, realized in commonplace materials that have been elevated in support of the cause. There are intimations of gothic architecture (Sainte-Chapelle specifically) accomplished in the economical, hierarchical range of lightweight dimensional lumber and a relative few cartons of steel connectors. This is no mere structural expressionism. The chapel is invested with what is perhaps the minimum

necessary tectonic depth and detail that is required to evoke the quality and character, and an equivalent sensibility and architectural intelligence, of an architect like Carlo Scarpa, who like the author of the chapel greatly admired the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

A single forty-eight foot tall vitrine just shy of fifteen hundred square feet and occupying a bench built to receive it on a hillside of significant slope, the chapel closely approximates in area the interior space of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House. Composed in response to rules for significantly different games—verticality and trees for one, horizontality and meadow for the other—chapel and house each presents a set of hard-won proportions and a memorable profile, transparency and reflectivity, structure and space: architecture with few of the messy concessions to reality that buildings almost invariably suffer, and few things that aren't reasoned and necessary. They are distinguished by differences in the relationship of each to its ground plane and by the sequence through which one arrives, each in a nearly pristine setting. Simultaneously luminous, spatially intricate, and conceptually dense, the interior space of the chapel consolidates each repetition of the basic planar structural web, layered in sequence on a single axis. The chapel may be to the Wayfarers Chapel of Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr. as the Farnsworth House is to his father's Fallingwater. As Fay Jones

insisted, precedence was to be seen in principles, mostly. A good site never hurts.

The iconic profile of Thorncrown Chapel is generic, compelling, and memorable all at once, enough so that it may eventually occur to someone in a position to decide that it deserves consideration for the Arkansas car plate (which currently identifies ours as the Natural State), a postage stamp or two in the next series devoted to architecture, or the label for an Arkansas wine at least. The quality of the architecture has proven to be as indisputable and as popular in the truest sense as may currently be possible to achieve. A tourist magnet since its completion, it has earned recognition with an American Institute of Architects National Honor Award and clinched the AIA Gold Medal for Fay Jones, finishing on top in another recent national poll as the building most admired by American architects. Jones expressly shared Nikolaus Pevsner's assertion that not all buildings are architecture, and he sought to elevate the quality of architecture and the stature of his profession in his native state. For architecturally conservative Arkansas and for the Ozarks, Jones's translucent and transcendent Thorncrown Chapel increased popular awareness of architecture, and with that may have expanded the range of what is accepted and expected from architecture, and possible for architects who choose to seize the greatest (if still relatively few and constrained) opportunities made available by that

expansion. Deborah Berke's 20c Hotel and Moshe Safdie's Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, both in Bentonville, serve as admirable exemplars that, by virtue of their program and scale, may never be so easily or profoundly loved as Thorncrown.

The photographs accompanying this essay illustrate architecture with a consistent attitude toward site-building relationships in prosaic conditions that are not specifically local in character, inherently difficult or particularly interesting. Neither forest nor meadow but simply the plot each commands as an economic unit of real estate. Ordinariness is the common quality that identifies each setting and these buildings are measured responses to, or despite, the banality with which they must contend.

Though reasonable approximations of the idyllic setting are still found in Arkansas, including the largest contiguous wilderness area in the lower forty-eight, there is much to regret in the rapidly diminishing space between towns and in landscapes increasingly squeezed by more and more highways, streets, and roads. The state of nature in the Natural State has been compromised by the self-interest and indifference of big boxes, fast food restaurants, strip malls of every possible variety, hotels, motels, expansive automobile dealerships, payday lenders, and the predictable things representing almost all possible forms of commercial inevitability that have accumulated



Thorncrowne Chapel, Fay Jones, 1980. Photo: Timothy Hursley.



Precious Moments Chapel, 1989.

through the post-war years. This is what provides the setting for contemporary culture outside the centers of those few large cities with vision, aspirations or considerably greater wealth. Most small towns and many of the larger ones in Arkansas suffer from this culture of obsolescence, intentional or inadvertent, whose legacy has not been kind to us: casual and conventional buildings that offer support for signs or the applique of meaning as shed décor, and that weather and age poorly. A state of distraction might provide moments of welcome relief from the damaged

landscapes and townscape through which one must pass to get to the good parts, the best of which are the few wild places that remain, including that which (perhaps optimistically) may still provide cover for the elusive ivory-billed woodpecker.

As Fay Jones demonstrated so profoundly with Thorncrowne Chapel (and one or two of the others he authored, including the Cooper Chapel in the nearby retirement community of Bella Vista) it is the architecture of sacred space that touches the popular imagination most profoundly.

This may confirm what one might assume from the many billboards in the Ozarks that lure tourists to the Precious Moments Chapel, north of Thorncrowne in southwest Missouri. The architecture of Precious Moments has qualities on the outside that were likely intended to suggest an incongruous, dusty mission more suited to the American southwest. It shares a common profile with Thorncrowne if you don't look too closely. Inside, there are sentimental, high kitsch murals that make one think of the Big Eyes paintings of Margaret Keane or the art of Jeff Koons, though Keane's

work seems restrained in comparison and the irony in Koons's work more certain. By virtue of the fundamental agenda for each, Thorncrowne and Precious Moments surely share an audience, as patrons may easily visit both places of pilgrimage in a day. The brilliance of the architecture of non-denominated Thorncrowne Chapel is that its spiritual aspirations were realized despite the modest commercial instinct that it, too, has as motivation. (Both are available for weddings.) Precious Moments serves common tastes. Though its architecture is direct and accessible, for full

appreciation Thorncrown requires a willing subject. Precious Moments entertains.

The small church presented here is St. Nicholas Eastern Orthodox Church in Springdale, Arkansas. Springdale is one of several American towns that claim to be the Poultry Capital of the World in the absence of something more compelling, an unselfconscious and utilitarian sort of place. Rich in the ubiquitous and ordinary things that characterize local culture in the innumerable American places that it closely resembles, it is mostly untouched by ostentatious displays of public wealth. Blue-collar in spirit and fact, popular culture outweighs high by a significant margin in Springdale. Monuments are few and icons are of the readily accessible, mostly civic sort for people who insist that a church should look like a church, a school like a school. Satellite dishes, the large ones once strategically deployed to indicate one's prosperity (but that now serve as reminders of how quickly things change) remain, cultural icons with little residual value apparently requiring too much effort to haul them to landfill. One of these, obtained in exchange for a couple cases of beer, became the interior dome of the sanctuary of St. Nicholas, and one of the church's better stories. Stories in architecture may be better than meaning, and more durable.

Springdale is a place of small industry, trucking companies, high school sports and minor league (Northwest

Arkansas Naturals) baseball. There are a few wildly-successful entrepreneurs requiring many employees, so citizens have been attracted by a healthy economy and relatively stable employment, much of it in poultry and related agri-business industries. Exceedingly pragmatic by conviction and circumstance, when Springdale builds the prevailing model for the aggregation of buildings and the resultant qualities of space are comfortably familiar, intuitive, ad hoc, and generally immune to abstraction and the excess of certain complications (such as order and density) that Americans tend to think of as undesirable attributes of cities, and things most prefer not to see transferred to their town.

Site and commission for St. Nicholas came with a metal-system building of the ubiquitous sort, with three truck bays and overhead doors, a modest entry door, one sixty-watt yard light, inadvertently reasonable proportions, and bones that proved sufficient; a modest head start toward the architecture seen here. The site is on the east side of South 48th Street, north south and parallel with an interstate highway to the west. Separating the church from the highway is a substantial strip of land that is occupied by a significantly larger and more conventional church, a random assortment of utilitarian structures and a few slightly incongruous grazing cows. The landscape is ordinary and sparse, neither inspiring nor deplorable, and characteristic of the only-as-urban-



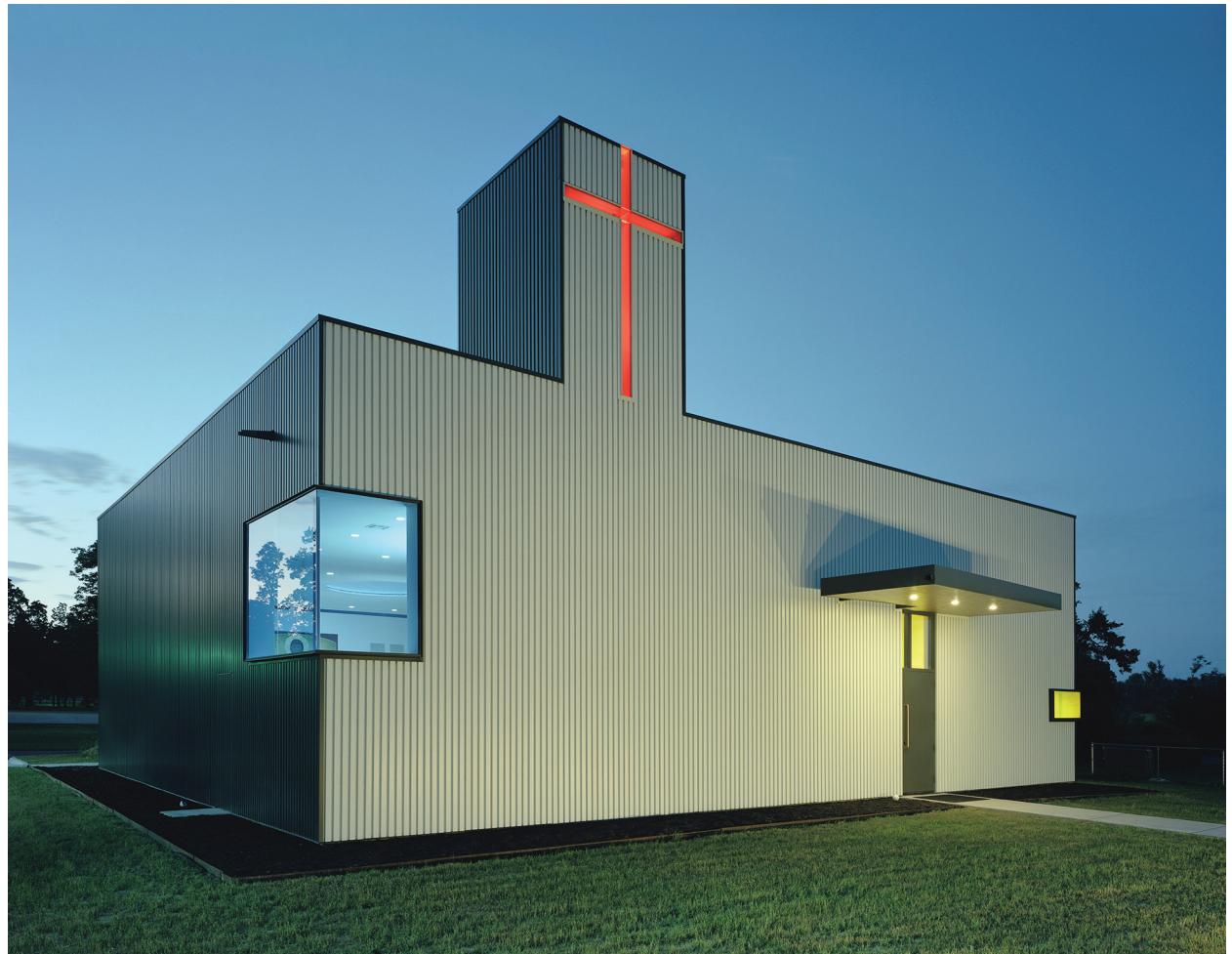
Original metal shop building (before). Photo: Timothy Hursley.



St. Nicholas Eastern Orthodox Church. Suburban context: view from the Interstate. Photo: Timothy Hursley.

as-necessary pattern and scale in which most small town planners, and Springdale's, apparently trust. It is the non-threatening ordinariness that is preserved by planning—planning that takes a defensive position to ensure the banality that is necessary to perpetrate and perpetuate the sort of placelessness that is a sign for some of a fundamentally democratic condition.

Though diminutive and closer than it may appear from the interstate when seen at speed, St. Nicholas projects a powerful presence to those sufficiently alert to notice a carefully delineated profile and taut white surface, especially compelling when seen in low, warm, afternoon light. Decidedly architectural in Pevsner's sense, a little architecture goes a long way in a setting like this. Architecture that screams, exaggerates or multiplies arbitrarily in just about any sort of way, anything duck-ish, will appear dissonant and out of place in Springdale, even along its interstate highway. Architecture that is self-referential and overly ambitious in a plenitude of quantities (including much of what is driven by algorithms, parametrics, and delusions of grandeur) would likely see its quality diminished when averaged and in juxtaposition with the familiar but lesser objects which attend. In a setting that offers too much space, too many signs, and too much signification it is best to omit an extraneous material or two, at least. Aggregations or articulations of multiple volumes and unnecessary meaning(s) are counterproductive



St. Nicholas Eastern Orthodox Church. Northwest corner at dusk. Photo: Timothy Hursley

as well. For architecture like that of St. Nicholas, a modest investment in profile or silhouette and a nod to simple frontality are sufficient, with just enough attention to the oblique view as is required for a bit of form. Presence is best established with decorum, delivered slowly with finesse.

Like Thorncrown, St. Nicholas has found an appreciative audience and received favorable press coverage beyond Arkansas. Both may be underdogs by virtue of geography. Both are magazine-cover photogenic and deliver compelling first impressions. The opacity of St. Nicholas is the antithesis of Thorncrown's transparency and therefore isn't nearly



St. Nicholas Eastern Orthodox Church. Sanctuary with dome crafted from a repurposed satellite dish. Photo Timothy Hursley.

so overtly receptive or open. Sacred space requires privacy and protection in a setting in which the profane prevails.

Two additional projects are illustrated here, secular buildings whose operative principles and site responses align them somewhat with the architecture of St. Nicholas. Both serve a Montessori School in Fayetteville, a university town that, campus aside, isn't substantially different from nearby Springdale. Located a short distance apart from one another in a commercial subdivision that has a strong resemblance to ubiquitous residential subdivisions in pattern and scale, with the slight if inadvertent picturesqueness that is second nature for civil engineers, planning and urbanism here only project as much place as necessity demands and the market allows. There is no Irwin Miller in Fayetteville, or in Springdale, and no shared community desire to saturate these communities with architecture so aggressively as has Columbus, Indiana. An architectural Mayberry is impossible here, given our history and prevailing tastes and expectations. Driving the length of I-49 through the Northwest Arkansas metroplex toward the Missouri state line, one sees the same pattern of development that prevails in most of America. Closely resembling what one sees while driving through the environs of Dallas or Houston or other places of affluence and conspicuous consump-

tion, it is readily apparent that the same model has been dropped on affluent Bentonville and is radiating outward in search of ubiquity and equilibrium. The pattern, the form, the architecture are antithetical to anything that might be understood as regional, or local. How does an architect with ideals, hope, and high aspirations embrace this world without being consumed by it? What is possible, what is necessary, what is reasonable and what is desirable? The Montessori buildings project one model in response to these questions, to the sparseness of a setting with too much space and too little presence, and to the authority invested (read "contextualism") in what already exists. One building is new construction and the other a subsequent adaptive reuse of a single-story, fake stucco commercial building that had just a bit more architectural pretense than the building whose bones became St. Nicholas.

Each Montessori building accepts the random and undeniable vernacular forms of the setting, yet strives to remain above or immune to the brilliant and insightful notion of junkspace that Rem Koolhaas has suggested. Without demanding undue attention or escalating dissonance and by dodging both banality and extravagance, the architecture asserts presence by the subtlety of studied adjacencies. Continuity rather than repetition and carefully calibrated difference in lieu of more



Montessori Primary, existing building before renovation. Photo: Timothy Hursley.



Montessori Primary, after renovation.



Montessori Elementary, entry porch. Photo: Timothy Hursley.



Montessori Elementary, south elevation from adjacent playground. Photo: Timothy Hursley

familiar, conventional, casual indifference provide an architecture with a modest, measured degree of figuration that neither dominates the setting nor disappears. The Montessori School buildings are quietly and subtly animated in their essence. When approached they are understood as if the situated body of another who has shifted weight from one leg to the other, or bent forward to present a shoulder, a cheek, an ear. To experience these buildings is to receive them as one would a gestural brushstroke that has been delivered with the precision, confidence and conviction of the stroke of a bat, completing and illuminating their present situation.