

# ACLS NEWSLETTER

ASSOCIATION OF CONSULTANTS FOR LITURGICAL SPACE

## Success!

2016 SWLC & ACLS Art and Architecture Track

Thank you to Our Speakers: Greg Davis, Jim Hundt, Carol Frenning, Ken Griesemer, Bishop Garcia, Johan van Parys, Gilbert Sunghera, SJ, & Sharron Hansen

In Co-sponsoring with SWLC, we were able to add to the programming with many wonderful presentations. Kudos all those involved and we look forward to next year as we work with them again as well as Dallas Ministries Conference!

The conference was great fun as always, reconnecting with old friends, catching up and enjoying the sunshine in beautiful San Antonio made for a perfect Winter-Camp! We look forward to seeing everyone next year in El Paso.

## SWLC Church Tour

*Robert Habiger, AIA*

Church Tour - San Antonio 2016 SWLC Study Week

Tuesday - January 12, 2016

By: Robert Habiger

Over 30 participants, most of who were ACLS members, took part in a pre-conference tour of four Catholic churches in the San Antonio area. The tour, part of the 2016 Southwest Liturgical Conference Study Week, was sponsored by ACLS. Each church provided a different design response for designing a worship environment and its own unique perspective for supporting the Body of Christ. While it is impossible to capture every design nuance, I will provide my own interpretation of these church designs. I do recommend that you plan a visit to these churches next time you are in San Antonio.





## San Antonio Cathedral Light Show

A delightful and magical evening at the Light Show had many of us mesmerized for almost a half hour as we watched the history of TX played out in a laser light show against the facade of the Cathedral.



### St. Anthony Mary Claret

The first stop of the day was St. Anthony Mary Claret church located in the southwestern outskirts of San Antonio. Our tour guide was the Architect and ACLS member Jim Heck.

With the parish property located on the highest hill in the vicinity, Jim described how breathtaking the view was when they first visited the site. The design takes advantage of this view by creating a clear glass window wall that encompasses the full width of the worship space.

Jim described the church design as being a traditional Texas church with limestone walls and a metal roof. Planned with seating in a semi-circle around a thrust Sanctuary, the 1,000-seat church faces north towards the large windows and view to the Texas Hill Country. Such a large expanse of glass can create undesirable contrast for the eye, which I did experience. I found being on either side facing into the center with the windows to my side as being more pleasant. The design incorporates deep limestone columns between the clear glass panels to prevent direct sunlight experienced in late evenings and early mornings from reaching into the worship environment.

While the glass wall is a principle architectural element of the space, a very dramatic pitched ceiling consisting of wood beams and decking creates a large volume and makes the space feel fittingly majestic. This architectural feature also reinforces the principle design axis of porch, to gathering space, to ceremonial doors, to sanctuary, to corpus, and to the landscape beyond.

At the worship floor level, the center aisle terminates at the baptismal font which is located at the foot of the sanctuary. Also on this axis is the tabernacle, which is inserted into a wall at the back of the sanctuary. This placement decreases its presence to the community and does not compete for attention during the liturgy. Jim described how during construction, because of cost considerations, the daily mass and reservation chapel was deleted from the project. This change required modification of the design which moved the tabernacle to behind the altar. Not only competing with the altar/ambo for attention, the space created for the reservation chapel behind the sanctuary is not as spectacular as the rest of the building. The other disappointment was the baptismal font. Its size does not correspond to the scale of the worship space and there was no water in the font. One would hope that water is present for Mass. A pleasant discovery was two shrines to Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Guadalupe located outside the main church in the ambulatory spaces. Each shrine can be seen from the Gathering Space. The design and lighting of each Shrine draws one to them in a very prayerful manner.

## St. Peter the Apostle

The next stop was St. Peter the Apostle in Boerne, TX. This church is best known for the controversial court case with the City of Boerne and Texas that went to the US Supreme Court. After seven years of briefs, court appearances, and appeals, the parish was finally allowed to modify the existing historic church and build a new church. Their story exemplifies both a tenacity and prayerful determination by the parish in staying focused on their mission to create a prayerful worship and devotional environment that is matched by the design execution itself.



After experiencing Morning Prayer in the church, the now retired pastor and Greg Davis, ACLS member and the architect for St. Peter's, started the tour in the courtyard-plaza. They both emphasized that it is to the court-plaza space that parishioners first come and it was meant to be at the heart of the campus. This concept established that the new church is located behind the historic church. The Easter fire is started here. Parishioners then move into a small Vestibule before entering into the church itself.

The first thing that is encountered upon entering the worship space is the baptismal font. A large bronze vessel overflows with water. Once in the space, one notices that the design is atypical to most churches. The seating is arranged antiphonally so as to have parishioners face each other and into a central and large sanctuary space of altar, ambo, and ritual. Parishioners described the seating as generating a communal feeling because you know when someone is missing. The liturgical furniture is modest, yet beautiful using mesquite, a native Texas wood. The music ministry space is opposite the main entrance and completes the enclosure of the sanctuary space.

A very special feature of the worship space design is how it is incorporated with the historic church. The design of the renovation of the historic church was described as giving new life to old so it stays alive and gives us life. The renovation of the old church into a small chapel, reconciliation chapel, and reservation chapel is beautifully executed with wonderful details and artist touches. Stained glass windows separate the new from the old and give a hint to the experience that awaits as you journey into the renovated old church spaces.

It was the attention to detail, exceptional level of craftsmanship, and extensive artist involvement that impressed me the most. From simple items, such as the wood entry doors, to the complex design of the baptismal font and the use of glass art throughout the space, all enhance the liturgy and all our senses.

St. Peter's is a true patron for the arts. Two of the artists and ACLS members, Shelley Kolman Smith and Claire Wing, were present on the tour. They each had the opportunity to describe their contributions to the design and how meaningful it was for them to work with this parish. At every location, and particularly in areas not expected, one experiences a meaningful encounter with the sacred that is enhanced by the art. One example is the shrine to the Holy Family that is located behind the seating. Here the architect establishes a small room accessed from the worship space through a limestone arched threshold. The bronze bar-relief of the Holy Family by Shelley draws you into the space. Once inside the connection to the Holy Family is enhanced by floating stained glass windows by Claire that separate the shrine from the worship space. Sensory experiences of visual, aural, and touch become magnified in the enclosed space which leads one to linger and connect to the larger mystery of God's presence and beauty expressed by the artists. This shrine, and in fact the entire design, demonstrates how true collaboration magnifies our experience of the sacred.

Lunch was at the St. Peter's parish hall. Located on a second floor across the plaza from the church and offered breathtaking views of Texas hill country. It was the perfect setting to provide a place to connect with friends and colleagues.



### St. Francis of Assisi

Our third stop of the day was St. Francis of Assisi located in the far northwestern area of San Antonio. I had the privilege to lead the tour at this church because of my previous role as liturgical design consultant for this project. Dedicated in 2001, this church feels much smaller than its 1,000 seating capacity. Organized around a hexagonal shape that represents the Eighth day - the day of Resurrection - seating encircles a sanctuary that is at the very center of the space. What exemplifies this church's design is the attention paid to movement and placement of

the principle liturgical elements. In a broad sense, journey and community are the hallmarks of the design.

At the exterior, a tree shaded plaza is an inviting place that connects parishioners to fellowship, education, parish offices, and each other. From the plaza parishioners move through multiple doors into the gathering space. The gathering space is large enough to embrace the assembly as they move from outside-in and provides a social center for the community. Movement from the gathering to the worship environment is past the baptismal font with the altar in the center of an octagonal-shaped space. The seating slopes down to a level floored Sanctuary. Not having any steps in the sanctuary provides sufficient room for the rites and rituals. The warmth of the limestone walls, wood beams, and ceiling create an inviting place. The altar, ambo, and other liturgical furniture are fabricated with pecan, also a native Texas wood.



My main concern for St. Francis is the lack of art within the immediate worship environment itself. The parish had a very limited budget when the church was constructed, which led them to defer art until later. One example being the current Stations of the Cross which were transferred from the existing worship space to the new church space. These existing stations are small in scale, previously relating to the 300-seat worship setting. Now, 15 years later, the parish will be installing stations painted by GE Mullen. "Buddy", as he was affectionately known by parishioners, was a member of the parish and served on the building

committee when the church was built. Sadly, he passed away last October before finishing all the stations. However, the parish has decided to install the unfinished stations as-is, a remembrance of God's unfinished nature for each parishioner and to honor Buddy's vision for the parish.

### St. Mark the Evangelist

The last church on the tour was St. Mark the Evangelist. Greg Davis, the architect for the church, described that thresholds and moving from the secular to the profane is a key theme of the design. We found out that the inspiration for its design began with a trip to Ireland. One architectural expression of this concept is a low ceiling transitional space between Gathering and Worship. The book of remembrance greets the parishioner in this threshold space. The worship space is a semi-circular seating layout that focuses on a wide Sanctuary platform. A dramatic feature of the space is the Christ figure carved out of brick at the back wall of the Sanctuary. Appearing to be over 20-feet high, the outstretched arms reach out to embrace the space and people. The processional cross sits within the bodily form of Christ making a connection between symbol and ritual. However, the Christ figure is in visual competition with the organ pipes. The organ instrument is magnificent, as was demonstrated to us during the tour. But when looking at the Sanctuary from the Nave, the organ pipes overpower the Christ figure. By itself the Christ figure would have created a fitting backdrop to the Liturgy, but seen as part of the overall composition, it loses its intensity. I was also disappointed in the lack of accessibility to the upper Sanctuary platform.



The baptismal font at St. Mark's is a precursor to the font found at St. Peter's. Both fonts have a crescent-shaped, in-ground adult immersion pool and a raised pool of water contained by a dark bronze vessel in the shape of an upside-down bell. However, at St. Mark's with the placement of the font at the front of the worship environment adjacent to the Sanctuary platform, it seemed too

removed from parishioners. In addition, the elevated bronze vessel, placed so as to allow visibility to the assembly, is not easily approachable by parishioners to touch the water.

In terms of light and openness, the design of St. Mark's takes a different approach than the previous three churches. While there is a central clearstory to let in natural light, at eye-level the worship space is closed off from the exterior. This approach gave me a closed-in or removed from the community feeling. It was expressed by Greg that this is what the parish wanted. While the bar-relief brick sculpture of Christ may be the most interesting, the parish also installed several stained glass windows, repurposed from churches being closed on the east coast. A particular magnificent window is in the gathering space. A large 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century stained glass window produced by Franz Mayer of Munich graces the space. Often repurposed stained glass windows do not fit into the contemporary architectural setting - not the case for this window.

### Conclusion

In summary, each church provided four very different approaches in terms of architectural design and the incorporation of art. This is appropriate as each parish is distinctive unto itself and should represent their uniqueness through architecture and art.

While everyone was tired from a full day of touring, there was a sense of satisfaction that comes from seeing both good architecture and art, but more importantly, how art and architecture can establish a worshipful environment fit for each particular parish.

In reflecting on the four churches that we toured I was reminded of a paragraph in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that states: "When churches are to be built, let great care be taken that they are well suited to celebrating liturgical services and to bringing about the active participation of the faithful." In their own manner each parish and its church building fulfills this mandate.