

ARCHITECT'S COMMENTARY on WILSON CHAPEL,
ANDOVER NEWTON THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

30 May 2007

The problem, and the pleasure, for a modern architect designing a new space for worship is that the old forms and styles cannot be relied upon to convey the complex contemporary world in which we live and worship. A designer must search for new forms, but without the crutch of old styles to support the conceptual phase of design, the designer must search more deeply for meaning in architectural form – giving if she is to avoid the trite and the facile.

The question of appropriate form is further complicated by the fact that Wilson Chapel is located at a theological seminary; it is not a parish or community church. It serves a variety of faith traditions. (Andover Newton is about 40% Congregational – UCC, 20% Unitarian, 13% American Baptist but also has students from the Episcopal, Methodist and 30 under traditions). Each of those faiths has its own architectural history, its own architectural traditions, markers, and expectations. Wilson Chapel also serves as a classroom; a place of praxis for liturgy, a lecture hall and a performance space for concerts, dance and theatre. Another distinguishing characteristic of a seminary is that it is focused on the future, on the unfolding of the Holy Spirit in the life of its students and the institution itself. A seminary must be a prophetic institution and its architecture should reflect this. At the very least its new architecture should reflect the time in which it is built, not the past.

Wilson Chapel needed to respond to three principal influences; context, program, and symbolic meaning. The center of the campus is a 170' X 550' tree lined quadrangle, with academic and administrative offices, classroom buildings and student activity and living spaces on the 2 long sides. One end of the quadrangle is the library, the intellectual heart of the campus. The fourth side was open, waiting 50 years for a new chapel. The symbolism of the two ends of the central unifying space on the campus being occupied by the intellectual and spiritual centers of seminary life was not lost on anyone. Given the strong geometry of the quadrangle, consensus quickly formed that the new chapel should have a strong focal point which should be centered on the long axis of the quadrangle. Furthermore, the chapel, a one story building, had to be tall enough to hold its own among the 2 to 3 story buildings on either side of the quadrangle.

Complicating the desire, the 190 seat chapel space itself represents only about 20% of the total floor area of the building. A small art gallery, a narthex, a chaplain's office, a 5 person meditation room, a 30 person prayer room, lounge space, and space for video taping, editing and web-casting were also needed. The planning solution was to place the chapel space on the center line of the quadrangle with a 50' tall glass tower or "steeple", illuminated at night as a beacon (Mathew 5:14-16). The glass tower drops into a pool of water symbolizing baptism and spiritual birth (Mathew 3:16-17). Entrance is via an arcade into a large narthex

68 Harrison Avenue
Boston MA 02111
617 423 1400
donhamandsweeney.com

4 Head Tide Church Rd.
Post Office Box 265
Alna ME 04535
207 586 6000

and then into the middle of the chapel. The gallery and chaplain's office share this floor, while the other spaces are in a lower level that opens out on grade into the rear.

The earliest tradition of Andover Newton, the Congregational, dates from 1807 when the New England meeting house was the dominant building form. As with the traditional meeting house, this new space was going to be used for worship, lecturers, and secular meetings. A flexible space, with movable furnishings, yet with a clear three-dimensional form, seemed obvious. But, as with the traditional meeting house form, it carries with it an inherent contradiction; it has a strong rectangular axis reinforced by the tower at one end, yet one enters the space in the middle of the long side. This feature, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, part of the transition of architectural form from house to church, was intentional here, to reinforce the goal of flexibility in the use of the space today. Ambiguity has its purpose.

The primary mission of a seminary is formation, of transforming people into spiritual beings who are able to explicate the Gospel, administer the Sacraments and minister to others. Formation needs to happen in community; it can not happen in isolation. Much of this process of formation at Andover Newton will take place in Wilson. The chapel space, a large room clearly of the 21st century but with historical roots, looks outward though the large glass wall to the south as well as inward reflecting the duality of today's ministry. Its ceiling, the frequently ignored 6th surface in a space, here follows the underside of the pitched roof but utilizes a "decorated" exposed structural system to tie it together. (Ephesians 4:16) Acknowledging and celebrating the structural forces at work, is a sign of integrity in a setting where integrity is a necessary part of formation.

Another key ingredient in formation is fellowship, the opportunity to discuss, as questions, laugh, experiment, and to be vulnerable, all in an open and supportive environment. The large narthex, through which everyone who uses the building and the chapel must pass, provides a setting for that informal serendipitous compliment to structured education. It was made open, spacious and provided with an expansive view to the Blue Hills, 8 miles away, to encourage that kind of use, both before and after events in the chapel.

Wilson Chapel, like the New Testament, grew out of old roots and traditions, but promises something new and exciting for the future.

Brett Donham, a principal at Donham & Sweeney – Architects, Boston, serves on a number of committees at the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts and is the Chair of the Trustees of the Episcopal Divinity School.