



THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF ST. STEPHEN'S

A RADICAL SANCTUARY WITH EXCEPTIONAL STORIES

The What, Why and How of the Architectural
Gem in Belvedere Known as St. Stephen's
Episcopal Church in Belvedere, CA

Karen Gullett

Presented at the church on June 23, 2024



St. Stephen's Building and Furniture

Presented by Jean Fair, Architect and former member of Belvedere's Historical Preservation Committee



St Stephen's Episcopal Church was previously located on Acacia Avenue in Belvedere. The rector at the time, The Reverend Edward Mohr, played an instrumental role in developing the parameters that were used to create this unique sanctuary and we are fortunate to still have the 25-page written document that he produced on behalf of the Building Committee.

A summary follows:

- The internal space should be the essential element.
- Emphasis should be on historic liturgical proportions. Horizontally length needs to be five times the width.
- Motion forward toward the altar should be irresistible, which could be achieved with adequate length to width ratio - 2 ½ to 3 times height to width
- Contemporary methods of construction should be used. It was not to look nostalgically to previous styles.
- It was not to harmonize or try to blend with the surrounding landscape.
- It should not be dwarfed by its surroundings.
- Masonry or concrete were to be used to convey permanence, strength and the timelessness of the Christian message,

Schematic Architectural drawings were created to facilitate locating an appropriate site.

This site was acquired in 1952. One quarter acre was purchased from what was originally the Belvedere Golf Club which encompassed that portion of the island. The price was \$11,000.

It met all the criteria in the design principles:

- No distortion of the church building dimensions would be required.
- It allowed access to the church building from the street level, requiring no stairs at entry.
- There were no neighbors or other buildings yet allowing it to have a very prominent position.

The Tiburon Pelican of November 1953 stated a local architect was hired to "complete a contemporary design based on historic forms."

Ernest Winkler, of Winkler and Winkler, was selected to be the architect. He had lived in Belvedere at 112 Bella Vista Ave. Most importantly, he was part of a core set of regional architects working in the raw concrete or Brutalist style of architecture.

This radical approach to use raw concrete, brut, design first emerged in the 1940's. The origin of this utilitarian construction method stems from France, where architect Le Corbusier focused on highlighting concrete to convey structure, strength, honesty and a reverence for the raw materials.

In the Bay Area, between 1945 and 1970, Brut or raw concrete was used for many institutional buildings - Bauer Wurster Hall on the UC Berkeley campus designed by William Wurster who was a colleague of Winkler, the former UC Berkeley Art Museum, the Oakland Museum of California, the Hyatt Embarcadero, the Transamerica Pyramid Building, and St. Mary's Cathedral are all examples.

Still rare for parish or community church architecture, the St. Stephen's sanctuary is quite unique consistent with the design principles:

- Simple shapes so the interior space may dictate the essential elements.
- Raw concrete to show permanence and strength.
- Not looking back to older methods of church construction, concrete conveyed modern innovation.
- Timelessness achieved through freedom from stylistic mannerism.

The sanctuary took 11 months to build and was dedicated in 1955. The cost was \$110,000.

In the late 1960s, the Reverend John Thornton was the rector. Known as quite an innovator, he rearranged the worship space adding the central, communal altar and relocating the baptismal font to the entry of the church. His belief was the congregation was central to the service. Focus should not be on the rector, but on the people.

A parishioner spotted one of David Foss's furniture pieces in a design showroom in San Francisco and introduced him to Rev. Thornton.

Foss was a self-taught craftsman, as many woodworkers are, with a workshop in San Rafael.

The Bay Area and Marin, especially, was a craft stronghold which St. Stephen's was to benefit from initially and in ongoing years.

Foss, for instance, was a member of the Baulines Craft Guild, located in Bolinas. The Guild was founded in 1972 by Art Espenet Carpenter, who has well known pieces in the Smithsonian and New York MOMA. Foss was influenced by Danish Modern Design important to the Guild, and by Carpenter in particular.

Art Carpenter more directly impacted the pieces in St. Stephen's too- The table in the narthex or entry of the church is his work.

Foss purchased a pallet of small pieces, 4"x 6", of California Walnut from Art Carpenter. This was the inspiration for the complex joinery found in the altar and the baptismal font.

The circular design was Rev. Thornton's contribution, the hexagonal shape was Foss's. The altar, baptismal font and candlesticks are all California Walnut, oil finish, no stain. They were completed and installed in 1972.

Fortunately, this information came from meetings and conversations I was able to have directly with David Foss.

The parish, many years later, determined there was a need for a pulpit. Early schematic design drawings were made by me in 2018.

- The wood & finish were to match the altar.
- With a circular shape and joinery design to also mirror the altar.
- It was to be high enough for all to see, but not appear too lofty.

A search began to find someone interested, who was also capable of building such a pulpit. One of the parishioners, Jan Gullett, who is an accomplished, amateur wood craftsman, volunteered.

Creating the working drawings for the new pulpit, Jan was strongly influenced by George Nakashima a contemporary woodworker famous for the Peace Altar at St. John the Divine, and honored at the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Jan drove up to Oregon to purchase some of the last remaining wide plank California Walnut to match the altar and baptismal font. He spent close to 2000 hours working on it in his garage.

Again, it is California Walnut, oil finish, with no stain to match the other furnishings in the sanctuary. It was installed in 2023

In conclusion, this parish is very fortunate to be the recipient of such innovative thinking by its Rectors and to have built a sanctuary at a time when the Bay Area, Marin especially, had such vibrant architecture and craft traditions. The art and architecture that followed on those early days is a testament to this.



St. Stephen's Windows. Presented by Karen Gullet

The story of our windows *begins in France*, ends in *Belvedere* – and puts St. Stephen's on the *global art history* map.

In 2022, when I heard a scholar was giving a lecture about our church windows, I was a bit skeptical. I think most of us have found that in other churches, windows literally depict a scene from the Bible or are the most prominent aspect of the sanctuary's design – not so here. But, that lecture – by Laura Buchner – definitely confirmed I had a lot to learn.

Buchner received her Master of Science in Historic Preservation from Columbia University and has worked on numerous, prominent conservation projects, including the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the New York Hall of Science, and Grand Central Terminal.

She has received fellowships to research French stained glass and is now completing her book on the subject. St. Stephen's is featured in the book. These remarks are almost entirely based on her presentation.

Our windows use a technique called "dalle de verre" which in French literally means glass slab (which sounds much more elegant in French). Faceted is another term used to describe this style.

In 1929, a French artist, Jean Gaudin, was prepping for a gallery show, working in the Albertini Glass Studio in Paris. He arranged different squares of colored glass into a mosaic pattern – joining the pieces with concrete – creating a luminescent mosaic. It attracted interest and subsequently Jean Gaudin taught this style to his students and eventually began to apply this approach to church windows.

There was very limited adoption in the 30's with one notable exception in North America – Quebec City in Montreal specifically. Auguste Labouret, a student of Gaudin, relocated from France to Canada in 1939 to create and install the windows at Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. This installation had quite an extended timeline - Labouret worked on the windows for St. Anne's until 1950 – but given what was happening worldwide in the 1940's, I do not think we can say it was a typical construction delay.

Dalle de verre came into its own after WW2. In Europe, there was a need to rebuild or restore hundreds of churches in England, Germany and France. They needed solutions that were relatively quick to install, with supplies readily available and affordable. They also wanted the windows to be design worthy and the abstract designs that dalle de verre lent itself to suited the more modern design aesthetics.

On our side of the Atlantic, many, many churches were being built to follow the returning GIs and the baby boom into the suburbs and often used modern designs. In both Europe and North America, though, French studios and their artists were employed to create and install the windows.

So, enter St. Stephen's in 1953 with their comprehensive design principles and plans for a striking concrete building. St. Stephen's awarded the contract for its windows to H.W. Cummings - who owned a glass studio in the Bay Area and whose family lived on Corinthian Island until the 1950's. Rev. Mohr's design principles do not address the windows specifically but certainly the approach is consistent with the design principles. Also, it is said that the chunks of glass represent the stones by which St. Stephen was martyred.

Cummings had a working relationship with Roger Darricarrère, a French born artist who had relocated to Los Angeles at the end of WW2. Roger Darricarrère had been a student of Labouret which is when he was introduced to the dalle de verre approach. Cummings brought in Darricarrère to work with our project so there is a French connection ... but notably St. Stephen's is recognized as the location of the first set of dalle de verre windows entirely fabricated and installed by an American studio.

There is not much further background on the design specifications or process as the Cummings Studio moved to Massachusetts and is now closed with no records of St. Stephen's to be found in their archives.

So, these windows have to speak for themselves – and aren't we fortunate that they do? Buchner was impressed by their beauty and what great shape they are in after almost 70 years. She was most struck by the custom-made qualities in our windows. Importantly,

- The slabs of glass are not uniform – after they became more popular the glass for dalle de verre windows was mass-produced, with slabs which were typically 1 inch thick and 6 inches wide.

St. Stephen's are custom made – they are of different thickness and chiseled with different dimensions which provides the striking contrasts in color.

Looking up from immediately below the windows those dimensions are visible. It is also apparent why these windows are sometimes called faceted – *by how the edges are held to the concrete and showcase the different colors* – like a high-end jewel.

- The patterns are held in place with concrete. Epoxy was used later for durability but the earlier installations used concrete. Many of those have deteriorated over time as the concrete has aged but Buchner was impressed to see what good shape ours are in. It may be because St. Stephen's reportedly used a custom formulation for its concrete. For whatever reason, we are quite thankful for their durability.

The lower windows portray the Christian symbol of a fish, while the upper ones (best seen from the choir loft) include a chalice, paten (tray that holds the communion host), star, candle and carpenter's square.

These windows align remarkably with St. Stephen's heritage of dedication to the arts, the great talent to be found in Marin and the Belvedere community and finally our leading-edge approach to reflecting our faith.



St. Stephen's Artwork, Presented by Ginny Doyle

The Reverend Rob Gieselman was the rector of St. Stephen's from 2011 – 2015. During that time, he took a road trip with a friend up to Port Orford, Oregon. They wandered into a local art gallery and were immediately struck by a collection of panels featuring Byzantine iconography that appeared to be quite old.

He spoke with the gallery owner, Elaine Roemen, who was also the artist. Roemen let them know that she had only recently completed the pictures. She and her husband had found some rusted sheet metal on the beach. They got it home to her studio where she painted the panels in oils and then applied gold leaf. Roemen had been motivated to paint those subjects by the hope of making a sale to a Russian delegation visiting Port Orford.

Rev. Gieselman had felt the need to find some artwork to add interest to the interior of the sanctuary and thought these were perfect. Unfortunately, the \$2000 price tag per picture was beyond the church's budget.

It so happened that Elaine and her husband were headed to the Bay Area to attend a wedding in the near future. They asked if they could bring the paintings to hang and then photograph at St. Stephen's for their marketing material. Rev. Gieselman agreed so shortly thereafter they hung the paintings, did the photography and kept them up for the Sunday service.

The paintings elicited the same enthusiasm amongst the congregation that Rev. Gieselman had felt upon his initial viewing. As a result, several individuals and families joined together to purchase the panels. Ginny Doyle purchased the final painting, Annunciation, to honor her husband, Jack Doyle, who had recently passed away.

Each of the 5 panels St. Stephen's now owns is the panels are approximately 2 feet wide by 4 feet high and are arranged in the church as follows:

Annunciation – Mary Corner

Baptism of Jesus – front pillar, lectern side

Ascension – front pillar, pulpit side

Lyra – back pillar, lectern side

St. Francis – back pillar, pulpit side

Elaine has her Masters in Art Therapy from Pratt Institute, and a BA in Art Education from New York University. She worked for many years as an art therapist. Since moving to Oregon in 2002, she has devoted full time to being a studio painter.

More information on Elaine and her career can be found at her website: Elaine Roemen - <https://elaineroemen.com/icons.shtml>



St. Stephen's Christus Rex, Presented by Pam Martori

The Christus Rex is aligned with The Reverend Mohr's vision of selecting the most modern materials and technology for St. Stephen's sanctuary. The Reverend Mohr intended the Christus Rex to be the focus of the sanctuary:

- It had to be really big to fill the space
- It had to be as bold as the other choices in constructing St. Stephen's – brutalist style, faceted windows, and the church's overall dimensions, for example.

It is impossible to miss the Christus Rex when entering St. Stephen's sanctuary. When you look at the Christus Rex you will see:

- There are no nail holes in Christ's hands or feet.
 - He is not in agony, but in glory.
- His appearance is distinct from many western European representations of Christ.
 - He is not a blond, blue-eyed Christ.
 - The color of his skin is that of a middle eastern man.
 - The wood is stained so the color is intentional
 - He could have used maple for a Caucasian Christ.
 - His eyes are brown. His hair and beard dark brown, again consistent with a middle eastern man,
- The artist's style:
 - Elongated body, soft curves
 - Exaggerated proportions, especially his hands
- It is a crucifix but not of the emaciated, crucified Christ, it portrays Christ the King.
 - An internet search indicates crucifixes in this style are not common.
- And what you cannot see - without the benefit of binoculars or a blown-up photo is that using the grain of the wood, one of its growth rings, the artist left a heart



Heart of Christus
Rex.png

on the left side of Christ's chest -- The sacred heart.

And if this not radical enough for us now in the 21st century, remember this sculpture was carved in 1953.

So, who is the artist?

Reverend Mohr chose a local sculptor David (Dave) Lemon and commissioned the carving of Christus Rex in 1953. Its height and weight are unknown but as the Height of the church is 2.5 times the width and it fills the space, it is tall – much greater than life sized.

We do not know how much it cost but we do know that it was underwritten at least in a significant way by the Kretchmer family who lived in Belvedere in the Organ House and owned the Red Vine Licorice Company.

- Clarence Kretchmer was a San Francisco business man who bought the Organ House from the Blanding Estate
 - They renovated the concert hall into his living room keeping the organ
 - For 30 years, they held concerts
 - Every year, children from St Stephen's came to see their Christmas tree and sing with the organ
 - The Organ was donated to the Oakland Symphony and then to the Paramount Theater.

David Lemon was born in 1908. He died in 1997 at the age of 89.

- He was a sailor, a boat builder, and a sculptor
- In 1937, Lemon sailed to San Francisco from his home in Seattle, seeking work on art projects at the Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE) being constructed on Treasure Island. (1939-40).
 - GGIE was a world's fair celebrating, among other things, the city's two newly built bridges -The Bay Bridge which opened in 1936 and the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937.
 - The fair employed 3000, including many artists who painted as the public watched. For example:
 - Diego Rivera painted The *Pan American Unity* mural now found at City College
 - And Benny Bufano was working on a bust of St. Francis for the California Hall.
- When the fair closed, Lemon discovered an abandoned cod fishery on the west shore of Belvedere.
 - The Union Cod fishery (Union Fish company), opened in the mid-1860s.
 - A fire had destroyed much of the plant in 1937.
 - David and his artist wife, Jerry O'Day, lived, worked, and maintained a gallery there from 1940 to 1965.
 - It became the center of a prominent art colony until 1962.
- Remember, St. Stephen's was being built in 1954, long before the West Shore area of Belvedere was developed or even had a road.
 - The wharf and remaining cod fishery were all that was there.
 - Secluded from residential Belvedere with no roads to get there (road built later on fill) and no houses

- Just a treacherous cliff going down to water
- The only access was by foot using a steep path (300 steps) or by boat

There are multiple questions around the creation of the crucifix.

- Why was David Lemon selected as the artist? His wood sculptures were largely tabletop size, with nothing of the scale of Christus Rex.
- Why was the crucifix a Christus Rex (Christ the King), rather than a traditional crucified Christ?
- If the Clarence Kretchmer Family was underwriting, did they have a say?

We do not know but we do know:

- While David was a local artist, he had a reputation and resume.
- While his name is not well known, that in part is because he liked his hippie lifestyle in the art colony making art.
- He did exhibit in large exhibitions with well-known artists – Ruth Asawa, Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, and William Wiley, for example
- And we have the Rev Mohr’s words that he wanted a sanctuary where worshippers are encouraged to look ahead at the “Gateway to the throne of God.”

We also know that the Christus Rex was created at the cod fishery and then hauled by foot **over** the steep, treacherous cliff from the west shore to the St. Stephen’s building site by a group that included many of our parishioners. It was installed here in 1954

Returning back to the GGIE: Lemon and his wife Jerry O’Day worked there as assistants for Benny Bufano.

- It is possible to see Bufano’s influence in Lemon’s Christus Rex
 - Large scale
 - Modern
 - Smooth, rounded, simple, exaggerated shape

Lemon is also known for:

- A Lemon work was acquired by Grace Cathedral in San Francisco in 1957. Originally called *Prophet*, it was later renamed *Hosea*
- One of Lemon’s sculptures, a 16-inch teak piece named *The Feminine One*, was the inspiration for the Space Needle, done by his friend and architect Victor Steinbrueck, created for the 1962 Seattle World’s Fair.
 - There is a bronze reproduction of *The Feminine One* at the base of the Space Needle, which was commissioned in 2016.

David Lemon died April 9, 1997 at age 89, of a heart attack while on a sailboat in route to Orcas Island, WA. His wife Jerry had died in 1986. His Memorial service was held at St Stephen's in April 1997. Memorial donations were requested for the Landmarks Society.

- In September 1996, just before his death, there was a retrospective at St Stephen's of his wood sculptures lent from private collections, including Grace Cathedral's *Hosea*.
 - The show was sponsored by Landmarks Society and St Stephen's with Christus Rex, the focal point.

Other Fun Facts

- Anne Lamott referred to the building in her book, **Traveling Mercies**, as looking like a PGE substation.
- Instrumental portions of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* by Paul Simon were recorded in our sanctuary. Vocals were recorded later at a studio in NY.
- Jerry Garcia's funeral was held at St. Stephen's in 1995.
- Parts of *13 Reasons Why* about a teen suicide were filmed at St. Stephen's.
- American Bach Soloists have been artists in residence at St. Stephen's since their start in 1989.
- Many other world-class musical groups record and perform at St. Stephen's including the New Century Chamber Orchestra.

Attachment:
St. Stephen's Art and Architecture Brochure with pictures



Brochure. SS.
Art.Architecture.pdf