



Washington Theological Union: oasis of serenity

Ten years ago the four-story brick building at Carroll and Eastern Avenues, just over the line in the District, was given a graceful “makeover.” The Washington Theological Union, a consortium of seven Catholic holy orders, had purchased the world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to establish a campus for its school of theology.

David Cox, one of the architects hired by the Union to make the transformation, remembers “standing out on Laurel [Avenue] and looking at that forlorn building with its loading dock, pondering how to begin the transition to a seminary.”

The answer was to create a new façade that reflected its theological heritage. The results evoke aspects of a monastery – or at least a monastery as imagined by Frank Lloyd Wright. Yellow bricks set off the entranceway with a ceremonial gateway. A cloister-like pergola covered in wisteria serves as handicapped access.

Most ambitiously, they demolished the one-story loading dock to the left of the entrance, and replaced it with a chapel and bell tower. The Connelly Chapel of Holy Wisdom soars to a height of 22 feet. Sunlight streams through a band of slim vertical windows set in the upper level, while unstained maple, white plaster and painted steel create an uplifting setting for worship. Not surprisingly, the chapel earned the American Institute of Architects Religious Art and Architecture Award for 1997.

The corner bell tower creates a vertical counterpoint to the horizontal retaining wall, with a graceful white lattice at the top. The Washington Post praised the project for showing “how fitting in and standing out need not be contradictory.”

Inside, the 64,500 square feet of space



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. RON GRAYBILL

The peaked roof of the original 1906 Adventist building (above) is still visible through the glass ceiling of the Union’s reading room (below).



PHOTOS: JULIE WIATT

The award-winning Connelly Chapel of Holy Wisdom

in five interconnected structures was renovated to provide 49 residential rooms for students on sabbatical, 14 classrooms, a TV studio to tape practice sermons, and staff offices. The Adventist vault became the cafeteria’s kitchen. (Lunch, by the way, is open to the public, weekdays from 11:30 am to 1:30 pm).

In another impressive makeover, the central courtyard was converted into a spacious two-story reading room with the installation of a glass canopy. Named for its principal donors, the Chris and Dolores Degheri Reading Room and the adjacent library contain more than 100,000 volumes.

The Union was conceived in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which radically altered life for Catholics, especially priests. The reforms of Vatican II declared that Mass would no longer be said in Latin, and that priests would face the congregation, and share communion.

The seminaries that trained priests had to adjust to the new rules. Several small seminaries in Washington, DC decided to pool their resources to create a school of theology. Each religious community preserved its identity but shared a common faculty and curriculum. In the beginning it was an achievement just to have different orders study together. A revised curriculum shifted the focus from seminary training to theological study combined with practical ministry. Within a few years, not only were religious women invited to take classes, but also Protestant clergy and even laypeople. By 1992, the Washington Theological Union was rapidly outgrowing its rented space in Silver Spring.

Meanwhile, the Adventists, who had arrived in Takoma Park in 1904 to set up their national headquarters on the edge of Washington DC, decided to follow the migration of their community north up



“O Antiphons” by Celeste Lauretsen & Patrick Ellis (tapestry panels)

Route 29. Their departure gave the Union a chance create its own campus. But it required a major renovation of the old Adventist buildings.

Many local residents are familiar with the pleasing façade that resulted from the 1995 makeover, and take note of the bell tower’s chime as it marks the quarter hour. Few, however, have ventured inside, although the public is welcomed. Those who do, discover an inviting space that “delights the eyes and inspires the spirit,” as one visitor put it.

But the most vivid impression is the array of artwork on display. Art has always been a natural expression of religion. Here, every wall, every hallway, even the stairwells, becomes display space for art. A



Detail from “Reflection on the Cross” by Christine Nicoll Parson

few pieces are commissioned, like the unique hanging corkscrew willow sculptures by local artist Martha Tabor. But most pieces are by the students themselves. Curator Patrick Ellis oversees an astounding range of art – paintings in every style, plus tapestries, tiles, and collages — as part of the Arts and Theology Program. In addition, the gallery just inside the lobby features works by community artists, like the current exhibit by Art Enables.

Organized initially to teach priests, the Union has become a world-class theology school, with 310 students enrolled last semester. Six years ago the number of laypeople enrolled outnumbered the priest candidates for the first time. More than half of the students are older than 40, many pursuing their personal interests in theology.

When alumni gather on October 27 this year to celebrate Founders Day, they will mark ten years in Takoma Park and welcome a new president, Franciscan Father Louis V. Iasiello, recently retired as Chief of Naval Chaplains. Next time you walk by the building, stop in and look at the art. And if it’s between 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., try lunch as well.



Bell Tower and Entranceway