

Twentieth-Century Churches

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ABSTRACT

Religious architecture, and Catholic churches in particular, represent a substantial corpus in Europe. The possibilities provided by reinforced concrete were used to renew spaces and forms through a wide variety of approaches. The modernization of the nave was achieved through simplification as well as an emphasis on compact plans designed to unify the liturgical space and bring the faithful closer to the celebrant. Calling on renowned architects and artists also broadened the field of sensibilities. The monumental role of churches in the urban space was contested during the 1970s, before being reevaluated in the late twentieth century.



Peder Jensen-Klint (1853-1930), church dedicated to Nikolai Grundtvig, Copenhagen, 1921-1927. Built on the outskirts of Copenhagen, this church is part of an urban ensemble created by the same architect. Photo Simon Texier, 2018.

The twentieth century could have tolled the death knell for a religious architecture that had long been associated with the monarchical order. However, the Church and churches in Europe survived this anticlerical wave, as they did the development of materialism and individualism that made even the most faithful doubt the need to continue building places of worship in the 1930s. These places actually accompanied the demographic growth and urbanization of Europe, all while actively contributing to the diffusion of a new architectural culture.

Is it still appropriate to build churches? The editors of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* magazine, which was founded in 1930 and proved highly attentive to the changes in this program, expressed their doubt regarding the subject on a

number of occasions. Yet it was a building site that single-handedly expressed a movement of sustained fervor: the Expiatory Temple of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. The project fell in 1884 to the fervent Catholic Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926), who devoted the last fifteen years of his life to this colossal project, which was left unfinished upon his death and continued for a century before being consecrated in 2010. By contrast, it took Auguste Perret (1874-1954) just a few months to produce Notre-Dame-de-la-Consolation church in the Parisian suburb of Raincy in 1922. It was built entirely with reinforced concrete, and without any airs and graces: four rows of poles support low vaults, reinforced by veining with no system of abutment; the façades are not weight-bearing, and consist of molded openwork panels set with colored or stained glass.

The Search for the Modern Nave

Publicized throughout the world and hailed as a milestone in the history of religious architecture, the church of Raincy nevertheless had a limited impact on building during the interwar period. In many countries the modernization of religious architecture had been underway for a number of years: Germany and Switzerland personified this renewal, which also spread to Czechoslovakia and Italy. It was firstly characterized by a simplification of forms, with Alberto Sartoris (1901-1998) providing one of the most radical examples with his church in Lourtier (1932), one of the only religious buildings that can be likened to the International Style. Otto Bartning (1909-1983) also innovated with his Pressa-Kirche evangelical church in Cologne (1928, rebuilt in Essen in 1931), whose austere metallic framework freed up the walls, which were now entirely available for stained glass windows. In Prague, the Hus Congregational House (1933) by Pavel Janák (1882-1956)—with its parallelepipedic nave lit by sheds and openwork tower—is an austere attempt at a religious space reduced to its simplest form of expression.

In France, the debate was largely centered on the question of models. In 1913, the architect Alphonse Gosset (1835-1914), who designed Sainte-Clotilde Basilica in Reims (1896-1905), published a study in the journal *La Construction moderne* entitled “De l’esthétique des églises” (On the Esthetics of Churches), which compared a basilical plan with a cupola church. The author did not hide his clear preference for the latter—that of Hagia Sophia or Greek churches—especially because he believed it made “the celebration of offices more spectacular.” Reinforced concrete contributed to this renewal of the Byzantine model in both France and European countries culturally marked by the Byzantine heritage.

The widespread use of reinforced concrete was actually accompanied in Nordic countries with great inventiveness surrounding the plastic qualities of brick. One of its greatest representatives was Dom Paul Bellot (1876-1944), a monk-architect who built churches, abbeys, and monasteries from the Netherlands to Portugal, France, and England, and who emphasized the expression of arches and vaults (in brick or concrete), which he associated with a polychrome style at times similar to that of the avant-garde. In Scandinavia, Nordic decorative arts were reinterpreted in buildings such as the Engelbrektskyrkan in Stockholm (1914) by Lars Israel Wahlman (1870-1952), or the church dedicated to the pastor Nikolai Grundtvig in Copenhagen, designed by Peder Jensen-Klint (1853-1930), and built between 1921 and 1927.

New Plans, New Forms

The formal, architectural, and liturgical revival was even more noticeable during the postwar period, as the reconstruction and subsequent urban growth of Europe required the building of thousands of new structures. Begun in preceding decades with numerous theoretical projects, the movement intensified and culminated in the liturgical reform arising from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was most certainly a major break—it led to important reconfigurations of choirs and the massive disappearance of decorative elements—although it confirmed a long evolution of plans toward more squat figures. In 1957, the journal *L’Art sacré* provided a list of these new formulas (oval, circular, square, amphitheatrical, trapezoidal, and triangular plans), and emphasized the

need to converge the gaze toward the altar.

Even considering solely its Western portion, Germany continued to be one of the most innovative areas. While a movement of expressionist inspiration endured in the work of Dominikus Böhm (1883-1955) and his successors, most churches in the 1950s stood out through their great reserve and light-centered approach. A central figure in this field was Rudolf Schwarz (1897-1961), who among other works designed the churches of Saint Anna in Düren, Saint Andre in Essen, Saint Michael in Frankfurt, and Saint Theresa in Linz.

In France, it was Father Couturier (1897-1954) who decided to overcome the mediocrity of sacred art by choosing the best living creators, regardless of their convictions. This gave rise to Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grâce du plateau d'Assy (1944-1950) designed by Maurice Novarina (1907-2002), and decorated among others by Fernand Léger, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, and Georges Rouault. The productions of Le Corbusier (1887-1965) were even more striking: with the chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp (1950-1955) and the Convent in Tourette near Lyon (1953-1960), the architect demonstrated his sense of the sacred while making innovative plastic choices including curved forms, raw concrete, and the play of colors and light. The international phenomenon of Brutalism found a particularly rich vein of expression in churches, and took advantage of the expertise of many engineers.

Provisional Discretion

A movement of withdrawal began in the 1970s, as many churches were no longer considered to be neighborhood facilities. In 1969 Hans-Walter Müller (1935-) even designed an inflatable church in Montigny-les-Cormeilles that could host two hundred faithful on weekends. In an effort to have churches engage more with society, there was a movement toward more multi-purpose and even ecumenical buildings. The 1980s saw a clearly perceptible trend of churches returning to cities. Évry Cathedral, completed in 1995 by the Swiss architect Mario Botta (1943-) after a long debate—focusing especially on the legitimacy of its partial financing by public authorities—symbolizes this monumental revival, which is noticeable on a European scale.

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