

# 2022 Pennsylvania at Risk Preservation Pennsylvania

Submitted 2 April 2022  
Updated 20 January 2024

## Immaculate Conception Church

Pittsburgh 21, Pennsylvania

## NOMINATION

Immaculate Conception Church  
321 Edmond Street  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15224  
Allegheny County

## CONSTRUCTION

3 August 1959 .....Construction commences  
23 October 1960 .....Cornerstone laid  
8 July 1961 .....Church completed  
1 October 1961 .....Church dedicated

*Source: Church Dedication Booklet, 1963*

## ARCHITECTURE

Architect.....Belli & Belli Architects, Chicago, Illinois  
Project Architect.....Edo J. Belli  
Associate Architect.....Anthony J. Belli  
Builder.....Mellon-Stewart Company

Architectural Style.....Expressionist, Modern

## ARTISANS

Sculptors.....  
Bernard Gruenke, Conrad Schmitt Studios, New Berlin, WI  
Vincenzo Mussner, Ortisei, Italy  
Lambert Rucki, Paris, France  
Johannes Schluter, August Wagner Co., West Berlin, Germany

Stained Glass.....Roy Calligan and Nicholas Parrendo  
Hunt Stained Glass Studios, Pittsburgh, PA

## OWNER

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*COVER: The original cover image from the 1963 dedication booklet for the church (modified to include the nomination title).*





*The mosaic reredos was designed by Bernard Gruenke of Conrad Schmitt Studios and fabricated by the August Wagner Co. in West Berlin, Germany.*



*The Creation Window towers forty feet over the west nave, and was designed by Roy Calligan of Hunt Stained Glass Studios, Pittsburgh, PA.*

## IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CHURCH HISTORIC DESIGNATION

Immaculate Conception Church was a Roman Catholic parish situated in the Bloomfield neighborhood of Pittsburgh, mostly composed of Italian Americans. Constructed in the early 1960s, the church does not currently hold a local historic structure designation, and it is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In Pittsburgh, numerous buildings meet the criteria for local and/or national historic landmark designation, although they have not been officially listed. The process of designating unique structures as landmarks is intricate, and community resources may not always be available for such designations. Additionally, there may not always be a perceived necessity for such designations, as many buildings are considered landmarks in the public's perception, making the idea of demolishing them inconceivable.

This document aims to highlight the architectural and engineering significance of Immaculate Conception Church, emphasizing the hope that the building will be protected and repurposed appropriately in the future. The author is collaborating with Melissa McSwigan, Brittany Reilly, and Amy Fisher of Preservation Pittsburgh, who are assisting in the nomination process for both local and national historic designations for the church.

Gregory Weimerskirch  
Principal Nominator  
2 April 2022





© Amy Fisher

*"The new Immaculate Conception Church, with all of its uniqueness and functional requirements of the modern age, is a structure that inspires spiritual devotion comparable to the great cathedrals." [1]*

*Cardinal John J. Wright (Bishop of Pittsburgh at the time of dedication)  
Dedication Ceremony, 1 October 1961*



## PARISH HISTORY

Immaculate Conception Church is situated in Bloomfield, a working class neighborhood east of downtown Pittsburgh. Originally settled by German Catholic immigrants, who established St. Joseph's Church in 1886, the area also saw an influx of Italian immigrants from the Abruzzi region around the turn of the 20th century. The Italian community eventually formed Immaculate Conception Parish in 1905. [2]

Both St. Joseph's and Immaculate Conception's parishes experienced rapid growth, leading to the establishment of their own elementary schools. Immaculate Conception's elementary school operated for over 100 years until its closure in 2020, while St. Joseph's elementary school closed in the mid-1980s. In 2012, due to declining congregations, St. Joseph's, Immaculate Conception, and St. Lawrence O'Toole (in the Garfield neighborhood) merged to form Saint Maria Goretti Parish. Unfortunately, St. Lawrence O'Toole, which also had a modern 1960s church building, was demolished in April 2022. [3]

Immaculate Conception Parish initially built its first church in 1906 on Edmond Street and Corday Way in a simplified Gothic Revival style. However, a fire in 1925 led to significant damage, prompting a hasty reconstruction. Structural issues persisted, and by the mid-1950s, it was deemed necessary to construct a new church building. The existing structure not only suffered from structural problems, but was also inadequate for the growing postwar congregation in Pittsburgh. [4]

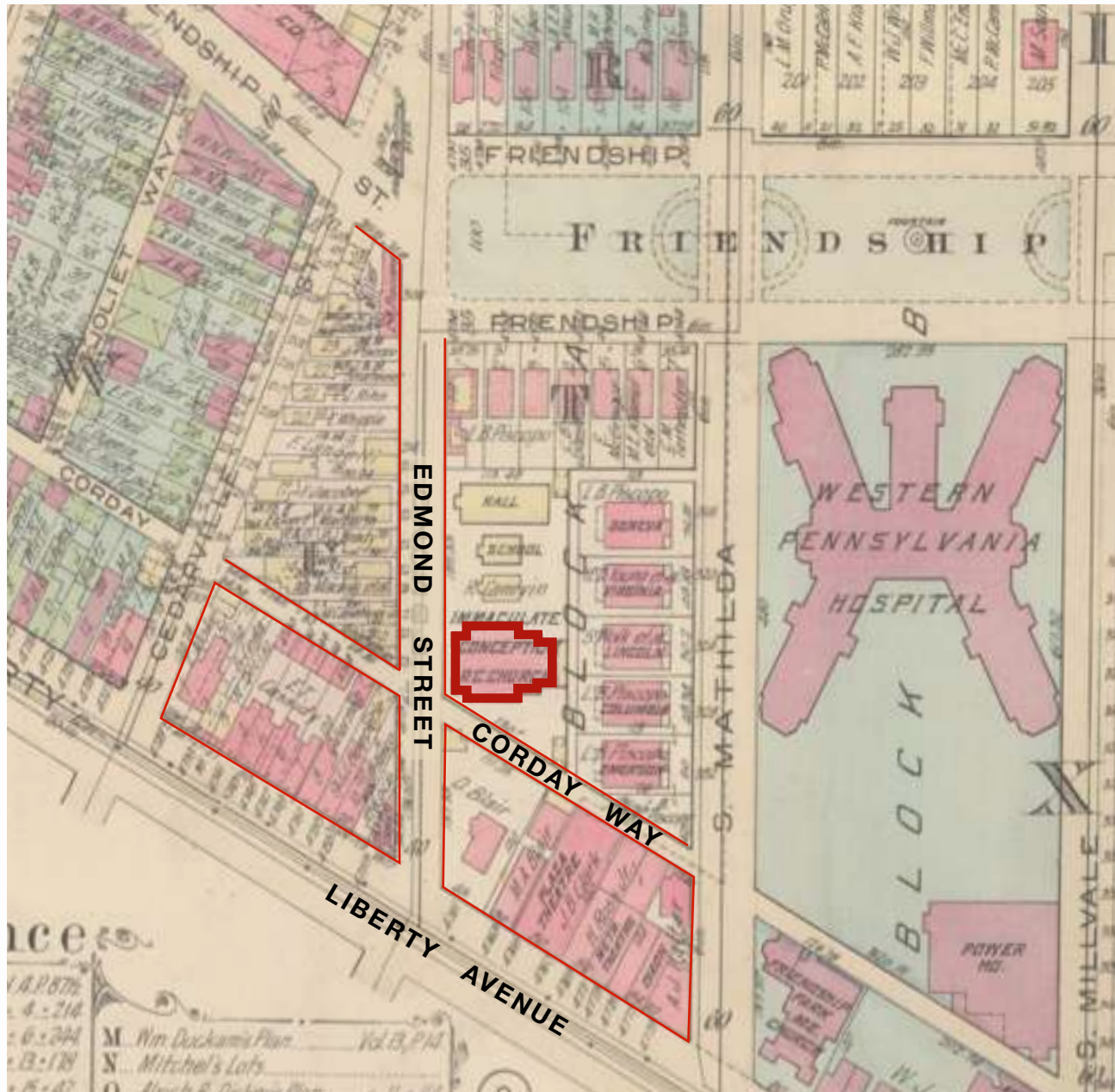
On March 25, 2022, it was announced that Immaculate Conception Church would close. The church was desanctified and officially shuttered its doors on May 1, 2022.



*The 1906 Immaculate Conception Church. Structural damage from a fire would eventually necessitate a new church.*



*Liberty Avenue in Bloomfield, "Pittsburgh's Little Italy." St. Joseph's Church is on the right.*



1924 City of Pittsburgh Plat Map showing the 1906 church in its urban context.



Interior of the 1906 church looking to main altar.

## THE OLD CHURCH

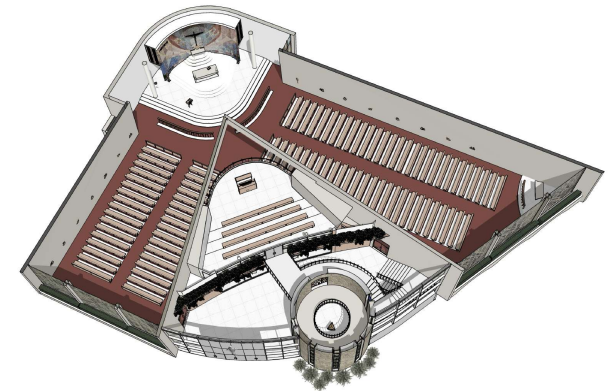
The 1906 church, outlined in red, faced Edmond Street with a side yard along Corday Way. A group of houses opposite the church would eventually be purchased by the City of Pittsburgh for a public parking lot. The church would acquire some of this land for a new school playground and parking area.

A new, larger school was built in 1940. This new building served as a replacement for a church hall and two smaller structures that had initially housed the original school.





Google Earth view showing the church in its urban context. The old church is overlaid in red. [5]



The constraints of the site lead to a design that incorporates two naves and seats nearly 1,000 parishioners.

### THE NEW CHURCH

The new church is oriented towards the intersection of Corday Way and Edmond Street. A portion of Edmond Street was vacated two years after the church was built. The architects needed to utilize every square foot of the lot to accommodate a larger church. The site constraints led to an innovative plan incorporating two naves.

The church is tucked into the urban fabric of Bloomfield and is situated one block from Liberty Avenue, which serves as the primary shopping street for the neighborhood.



## DEDICATION DAY



October 1, 1961. More than 1,000 people attended the official dedication. Edmond Street had not yet been vacated to accommodate the new school yard.



## ARCHITECTURE

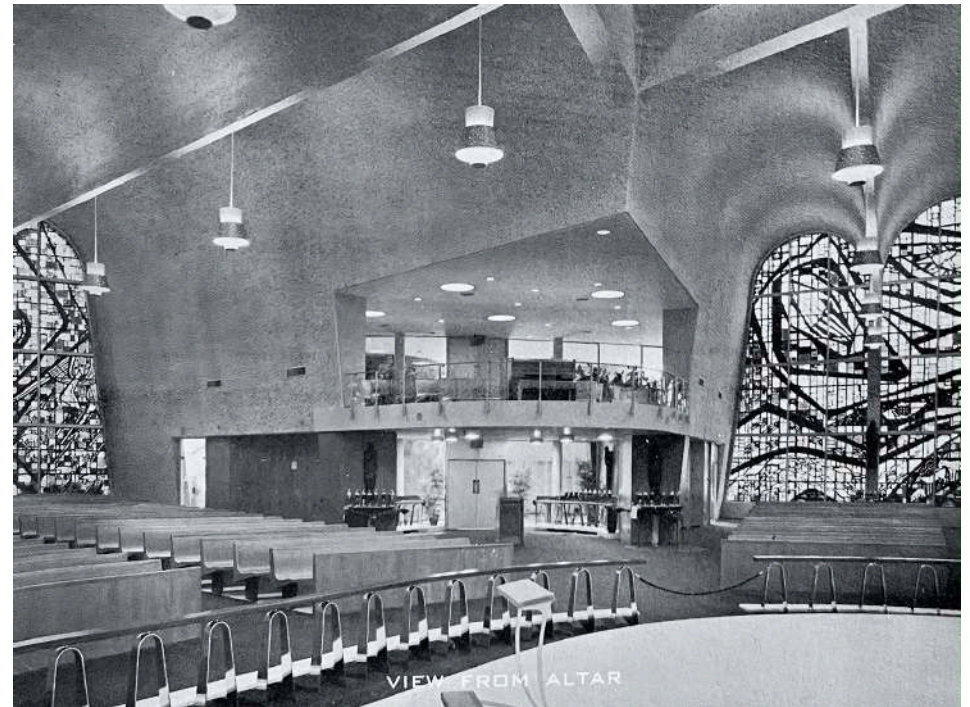
Immaculate Conception Church was built in the early 1960s during the Expressionist movement in architecture. Originating in Northern Europe in the early 20th century, Expressionism initially manifested in poetry and painting, aiming to distort reality in order to convey emotional experiences. During the 1950s and 60s, some architects embraced this ideology, employing materials like stone, concrete, and glass to craft unique sculptural forms and massing in their structures. [5]

Expressionism often entailed a departure from historical styles and traditional design motifs, opting instead for abstraction. This shift led to the creation of distinctive building forms, utilizing innovative construction techniques that set them apart from their surroundings. [6]

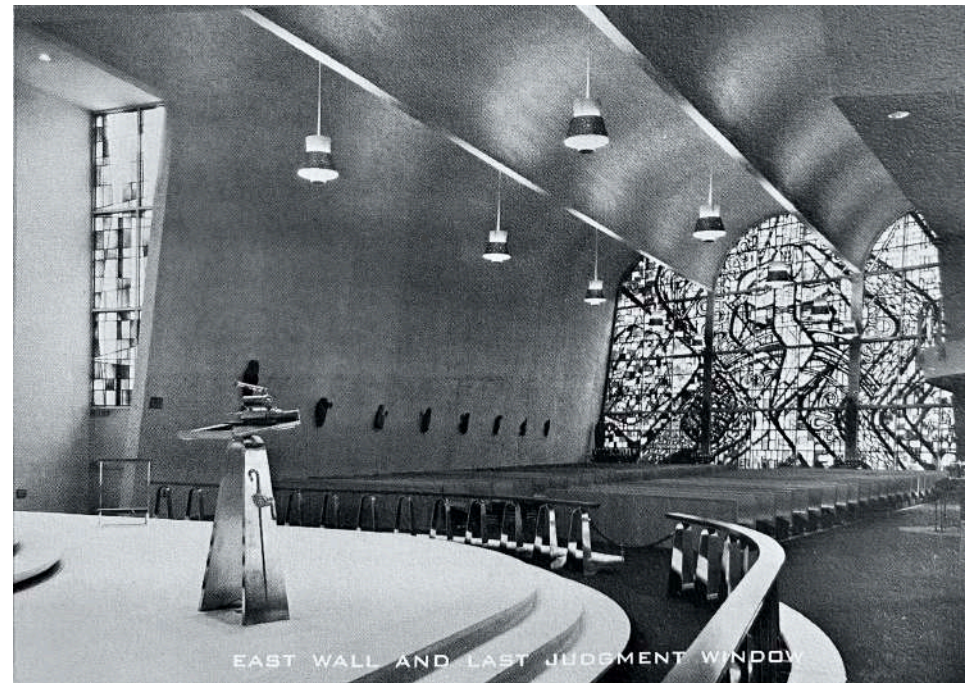
In a 1983 interview with the Art Institute of Chicago, project architect for Immaculate Conception Church, Edo J. Belli, mentioned his desire to break with tradition and “to design buildings that express a deeper meaning for their use and to transcend style, time, and place.” [7]

While Pittsburgh has a number of outstanding houses of worship in various styles, Immaculate Conception Church is unlike any other religious building in the region. Its sculptural form, set on a compact urban site, combined with its innovative construction methods, towering stained glass windows, imported altar mosaic, and numerous site specific sculptures and furnishings, culminates in a structure that is truly a remarkable example of mid-century modern design.

*The plan of the church responds to its site, resulting in a dynamic composition.  
Images from the Church Dedication Booklet, 1963*



*Monumental in scale, the new church seats nearly 1,000 parishioners.*





## EXPRESSIONIST ARCHITECTURE

Immaculate Conception Church was designed to inspire and transcend historical style through the use of form, scale, and light.

Significant examples of the movement include iconic structures such as the St. Louis Gateway Arch, the Sydney Opera House, and the TWA Terminal at JFK Airport in New York.



*Sydney Opera House, designed by Jørn Utzon, 1957-1973. UNESCO World Heritage Site, 2007*

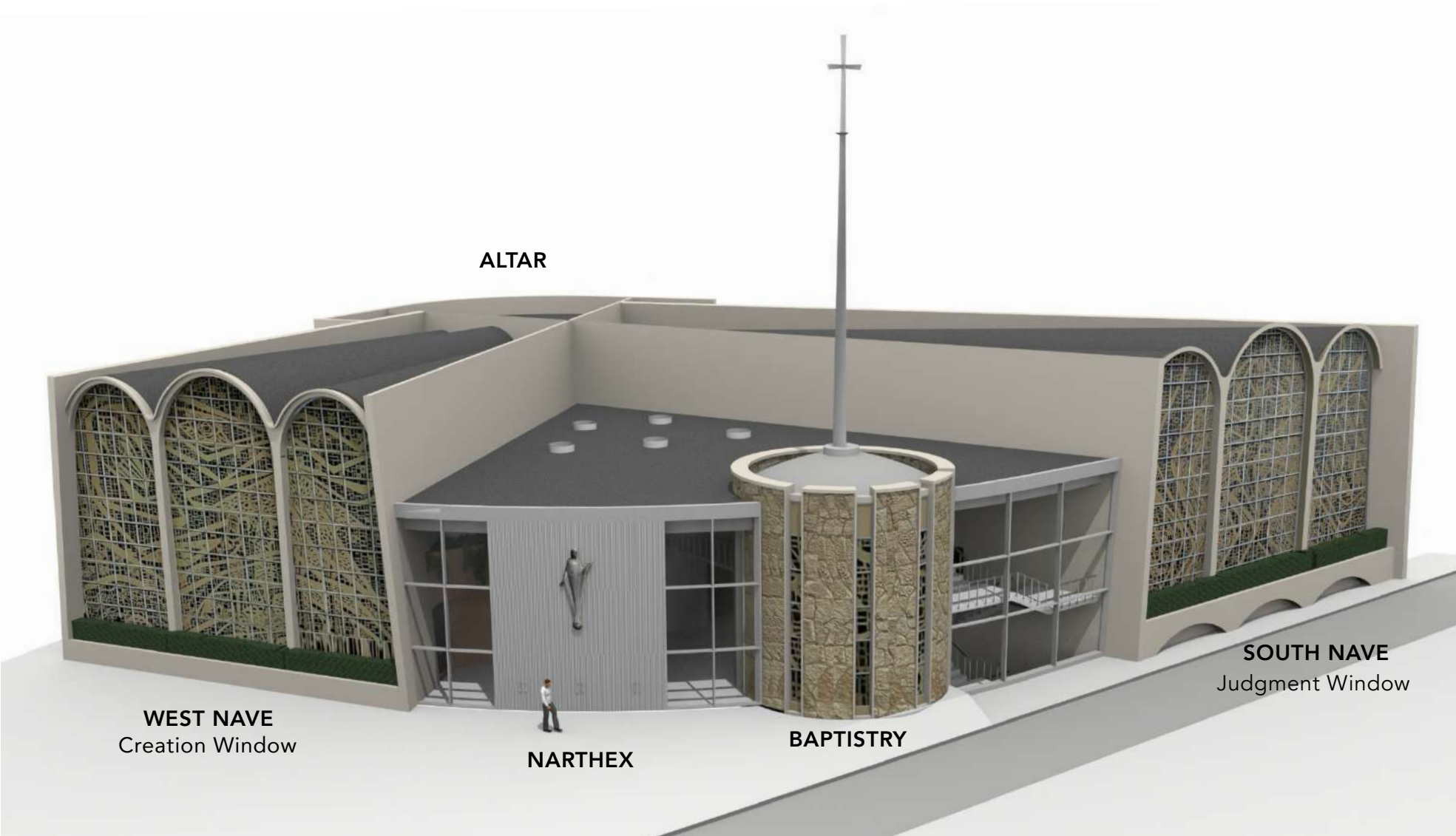


*TWA Terminal at JFK Airport (repurposed as an historic hotel), designed by Eero Saarinen, 1961*

*The Gateway Arch, designed by Eero Saarinen, 1963-1965*



3D OVERVIEW — EXTERIOR



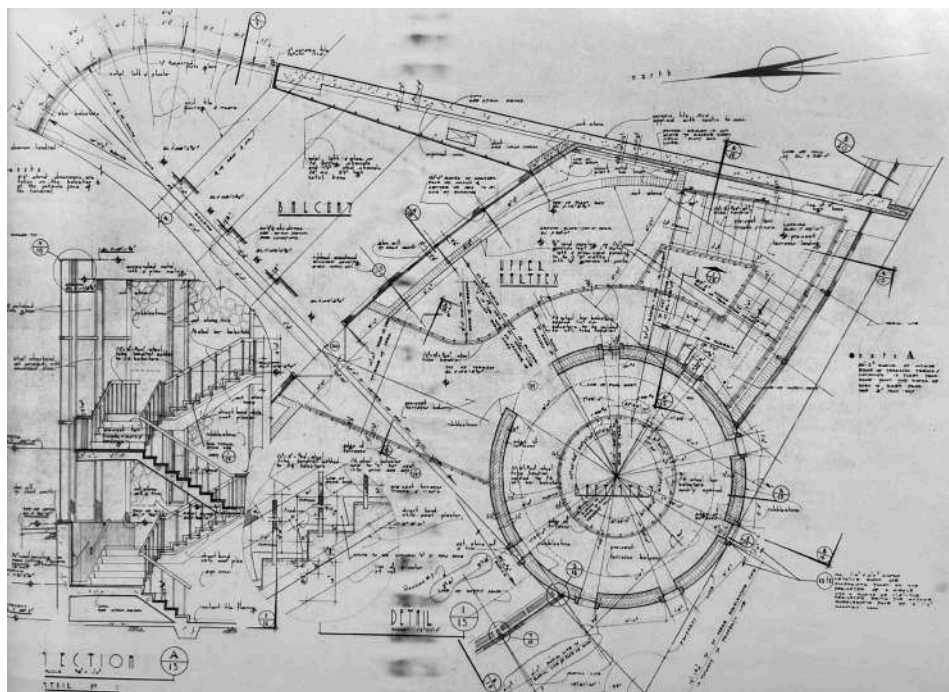


## CONSTRUCTION

The construction of Immaculate Conception Church utilized the thin-shell concrete method. This technique involved the erection of wooden forms, or formwork, reinforced with steel rebar, which were then filled with high-strength concrete to achieve the intricate shape of the building. [8] This construction method allowed for spacious, column-free spans and towering openings to accommodate the stained glass windows.

The interior concrete was adorned with over one million circular ceramic tiles, while the exterior features 4' x 4' slabs of Indiana limestone. The floors were finished with imported Italian marble and terrazzo.

This type of construction is uncommon today due to the high labor costs associated with assembling the intricate formwork. [9]



Walls and ceilings in the church are tapered or curved with few orthogonal walls.



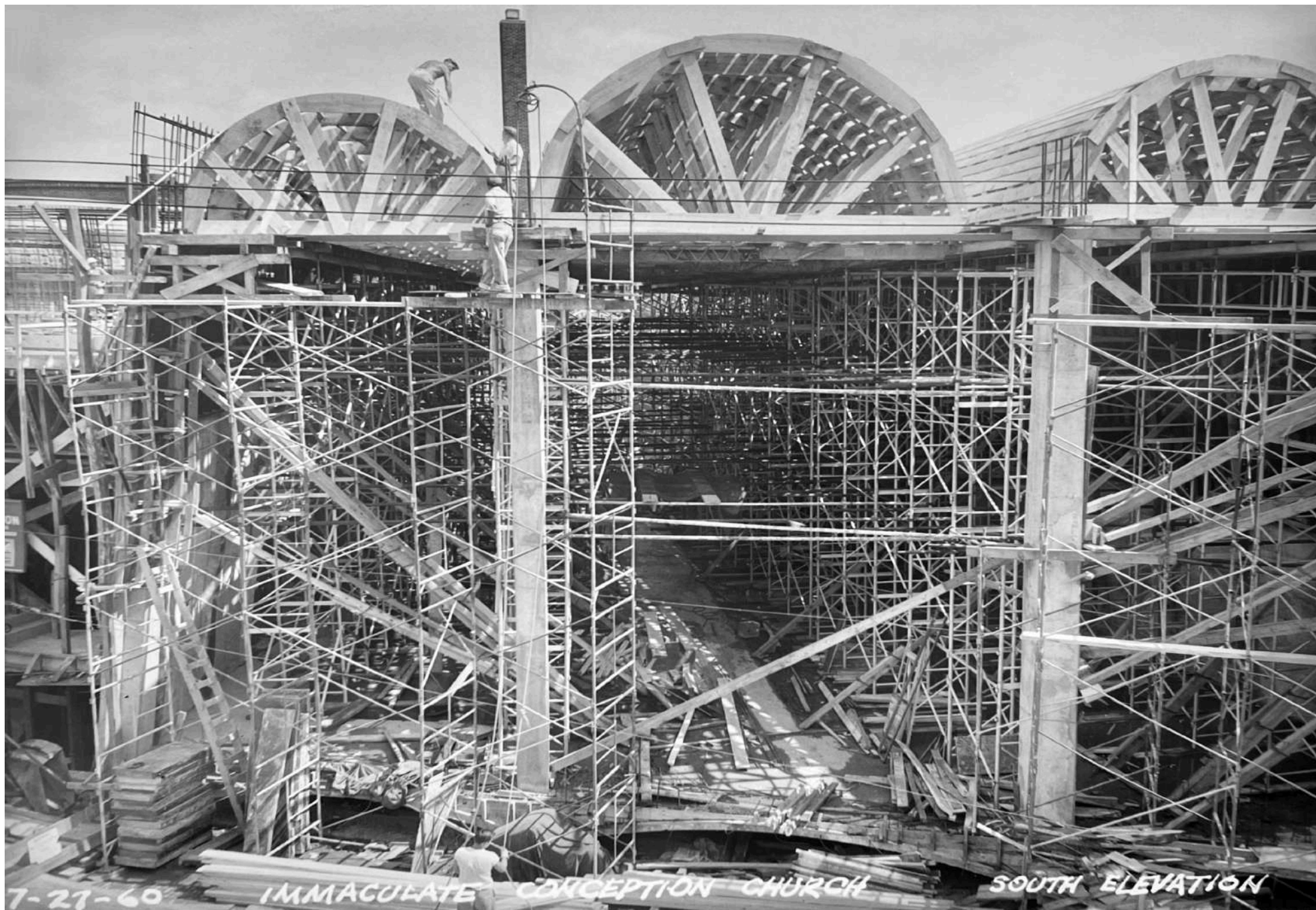
Site work began on August 3, 1959 with the demolition of the old church.



Choir loft formwork, May 25, 1960.



## FORMWORK



South Nave, July 27, 1960. A forest of scaffolding and formwork (wood forms used to shape concrete) are prepared for the pouring of mortar.



## FORMWORK



*West Nave and Narthex, July 27, 1960. In the foreground, the first house on the block opposite the church is demolished, opening the view to the new church.*



West Nave and Narthex, September 28, 1960. Scaffolding and formwork are removed to reveal the cavernous space of the west nave and narthex.



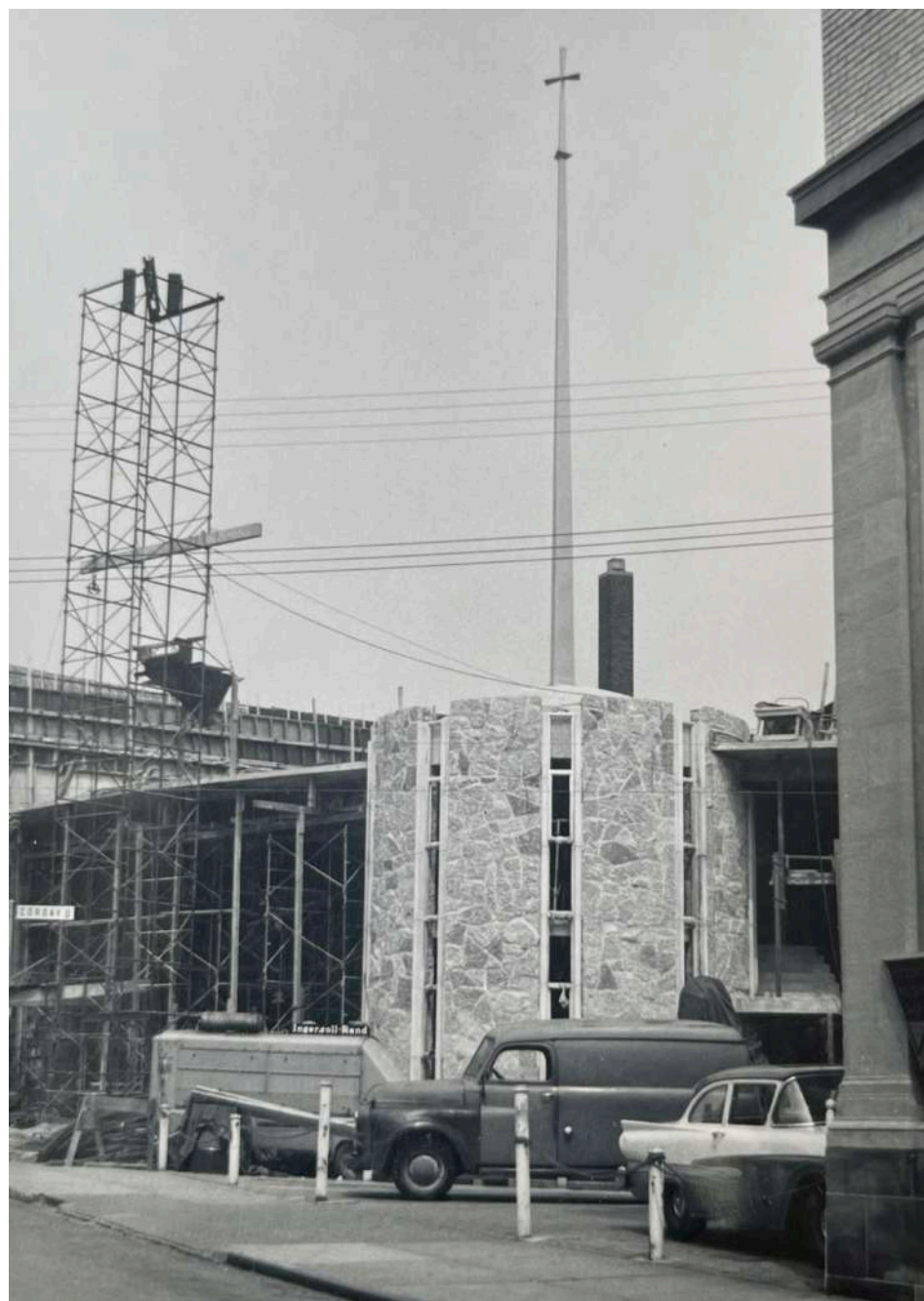
## CONSTRUCTION



*With scaffolding removed, the scale of the south nave becomes evident.*



*Stained glass framework is installed in the south nave.*



*The cross atop the baptistry terminates 80 feet above the street. It is three-sided, like many elements in the church's design, symbolizing the Holy Trinity.*



## CONTINUOUS CONCRETE POUR



*Formwork and rebar installation are completed on August 26, 1960.*



*The walls of the church were cast first before the roof formwork was installed.*



*The concrete pour began on September 5th, 1960*



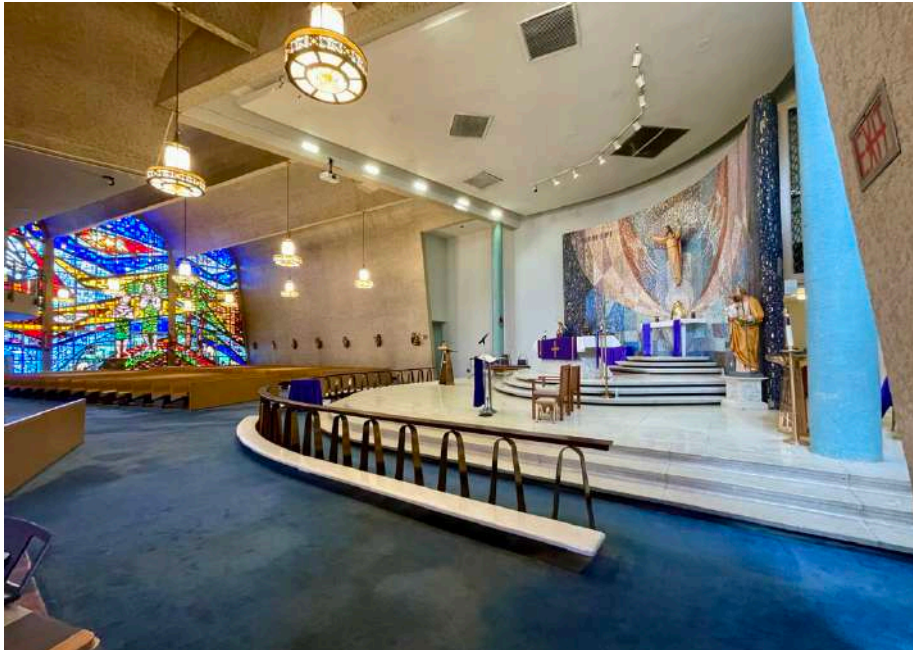
*Two crews worked 12 hour shifts, both day and night, for more than 36 hours.*



## EXTERIOR MASSING

The church features a central 25 foot high entrance vestibule (the narthex) composed of glass and aluminum, and arranged in a convex form. Extending from this focal point are two principal facades, each adorned with three concrete arches, which terminate the south and west naves. These facades feature 40-foot tall stained glass windows, employing the Dalle de Verre technique in an abstract design. The windows are embedded into epoxy resin panels which are set directly into the concrete arches.

Adjacent to the entrance, a circular, stone veneer baptistry punctuates the glass facade and is capped with a stylized crucifix approximately 80 feet in height.



Looking from the south nave to the mosaic reredos and altar. The floating ceiling and light cove above the altar were altered in 1989. Four skylights (now louvered vents) and original recessed lighting were removed.



West Facade  
(West Nave)

Narthex  
(Entrance)

Baptistry

South Facade  
(South Nave)

## INTERIOR

As described by principal architect, Edo J. Belli in 1963:

“Unique and functional are perhaps the words that best describe the new Immaculate Conception Church. Unique in that the demands of the site and its limitations forced a design concept never before investigated and one which turned the limitations of the location to the complete advantage of the designer. Unique also is the isolated Baptistry of circumform design bordering the entrance, the glass doors which encroach immediately upon the elevated Sanctuary, without the usual adorned walls, which are often overpowering with false ornamentation as to detract from the main altar.” [10]

## INTERIOR

Edo J. Belli continues:

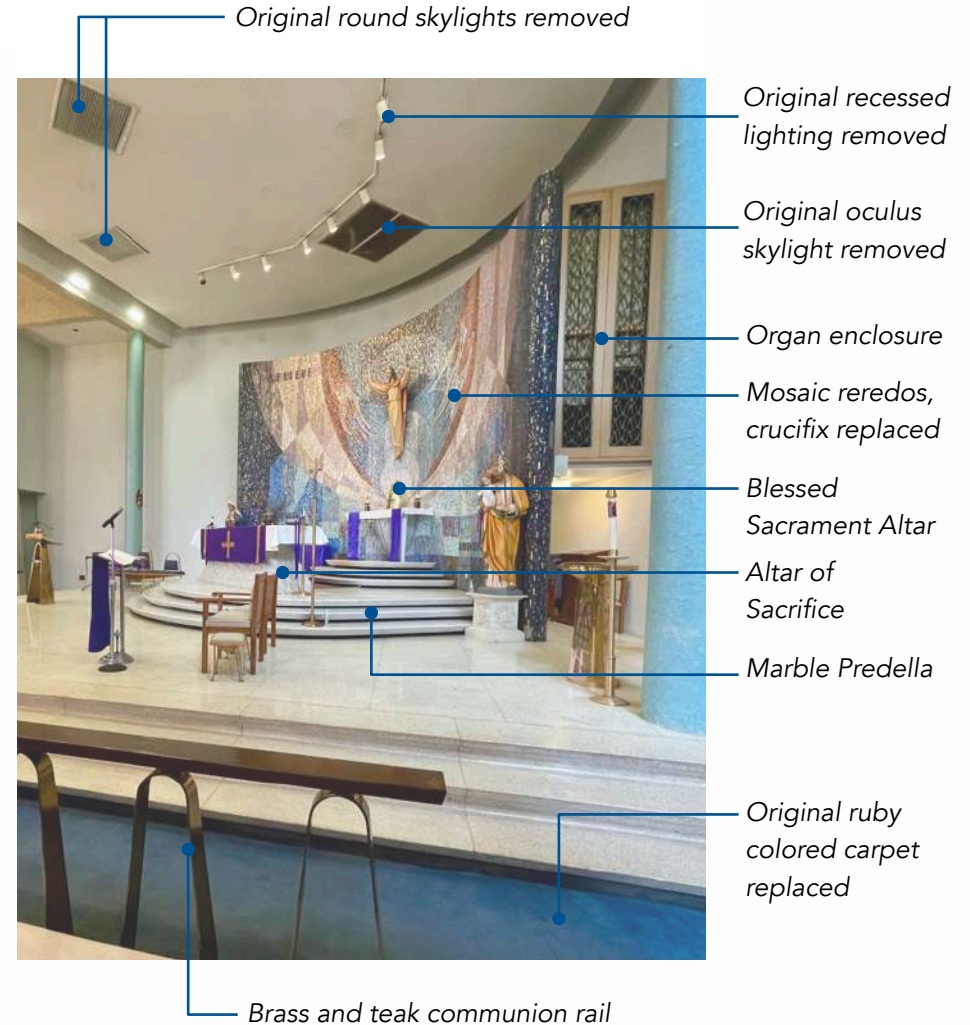
“In the Sanctuary design of Immaculate Conception, and in keeping with the liturgical laws of the Catholic Church, incorporated are two principal altars:

1. The Blessed Sacrament Altar, or High Altar, supports the Tabernacle placed in such a position as to render a clear unobstructed view from anywhere in the church.
2. The Altar of Sacrifice, is the central culmination point of the church, and its position in form has been so designed as to give expression to this prominence. This altar consists of two parts, the 5-ton textured white granite base symbolizing the Church’s strength, and the highly polished 2-ton mensa (flat stone) carved from a solid piece of white Carrara marble.

This all in turn is supported on a three step white marble predella directly tied to the multi-colored mosaic reredos.” [10]

— Edo J. Belli, *Church Dedication Booklet*, 1963

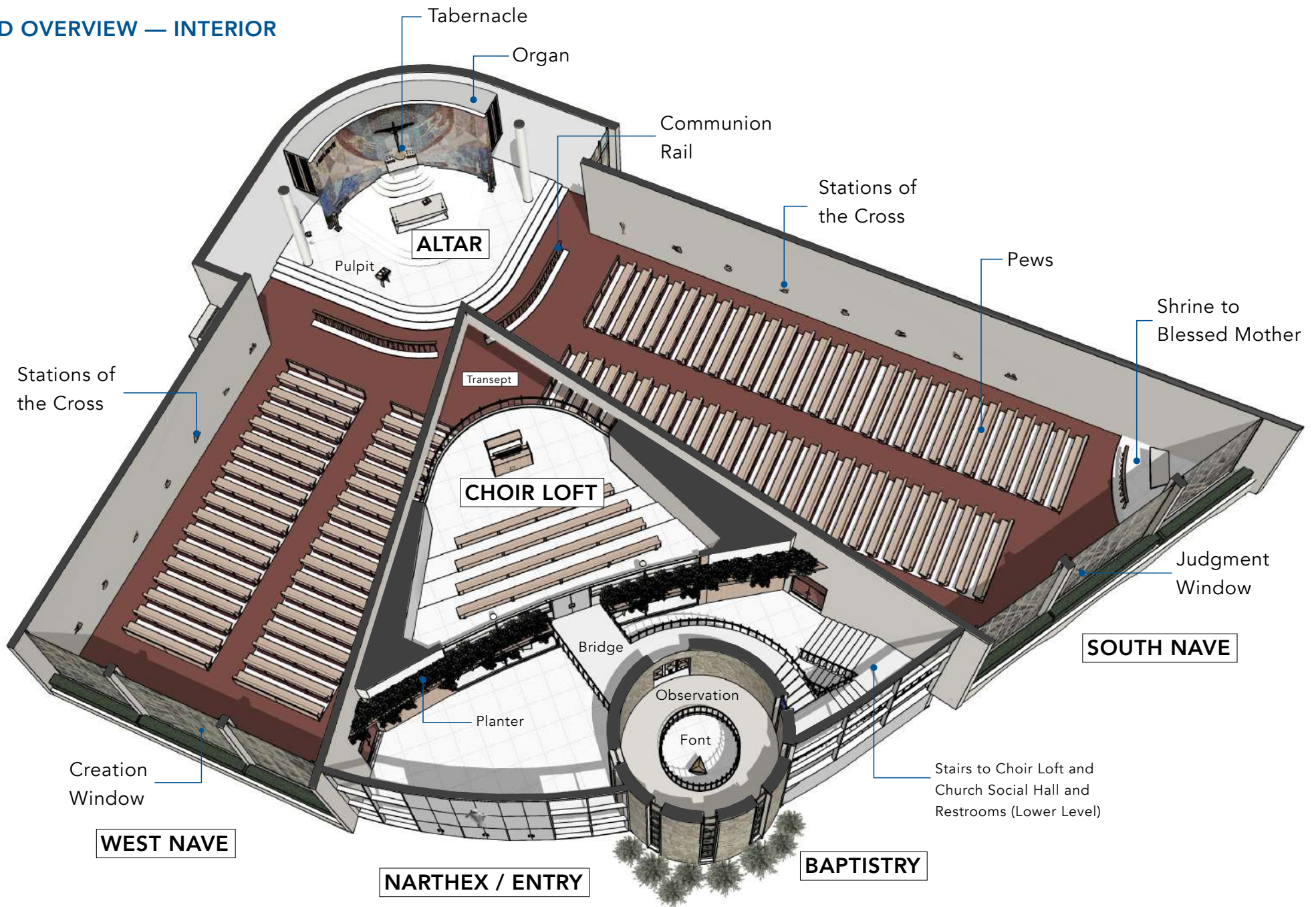
## 1989 ALTERATIONS — ALTAR CEILING



*The removal of skylights and recessed lighting from the altar in 1989 detracts from the spiritual intent of the design. The presence of louvered vents and track lighting appears incongruent with the overall quality of detail present throughout the church.*



### 3D OVERVIEW — INTERIOR

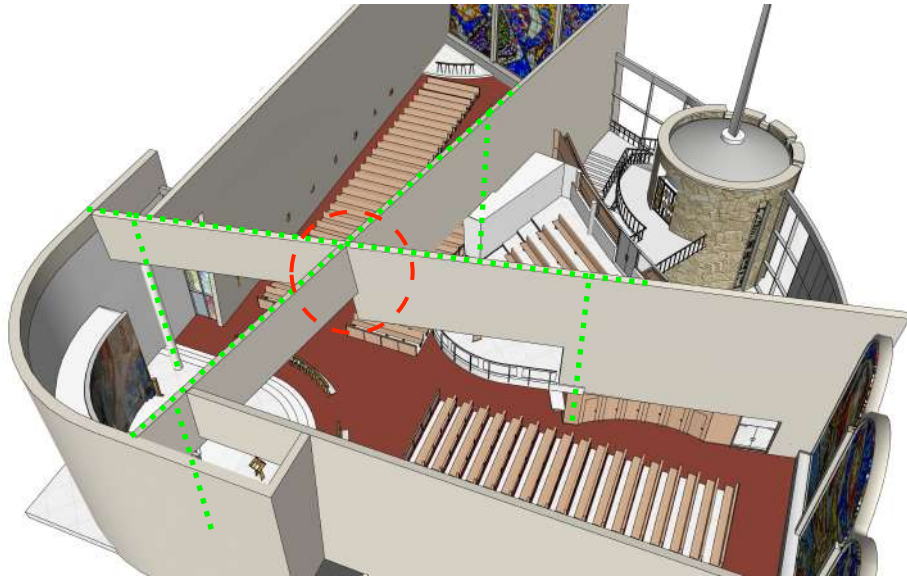


3D model of the church as built. The model illustrates the original crucifix, carpeting, lighting, and skylights before the 1989 alterations.





Barrel vaults of the south and west naves are supported by two immense beams at about 80' in length (dashed in green).

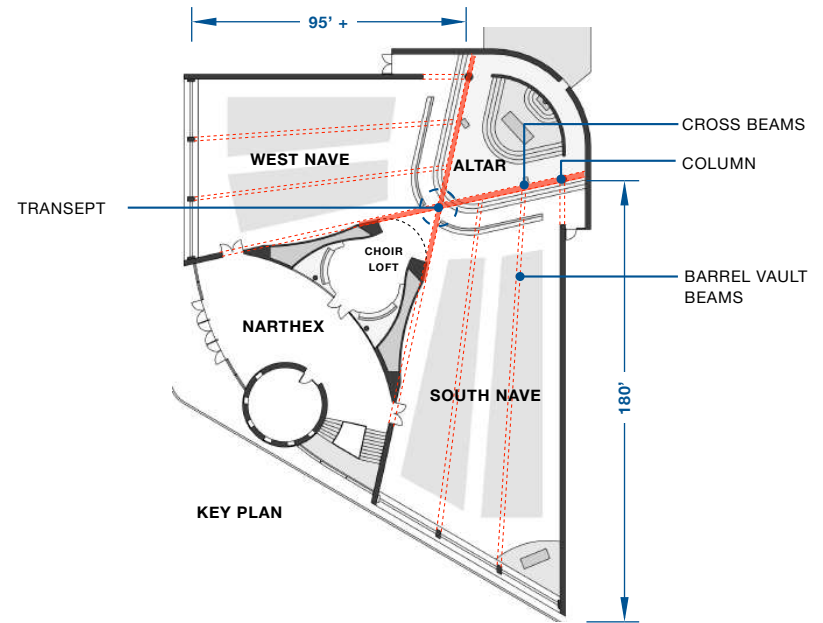


The enormous beams intersect at the transept of the church, in front of the main altar (dashed in red)

## ENGINEERING

As outlined in the church dedication booklet by co-architect Anthony J. Belli, "the church is built using cast reinforced concrete, with steel employed exclusively at the baptistry to bear the substantial weight of the exterior cross. This construction method was selected to enable spanning great distances and achieving unobstructed views toward the altar." [12]

The remarkable engineering becomes particularly apparent at the intersection of each nave and the altar, positioned directly above the transept. At this juncture, the expansive 180-foot span of the south nave and the 95-foot span of the west nave seemingly intersect in mid-air without any visible means of support.



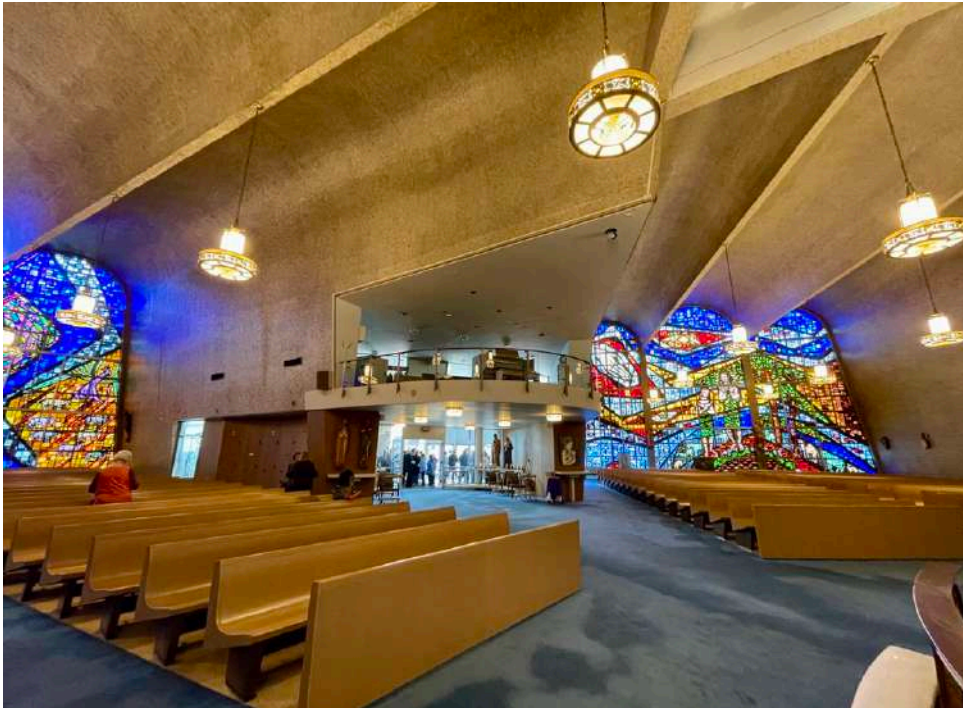




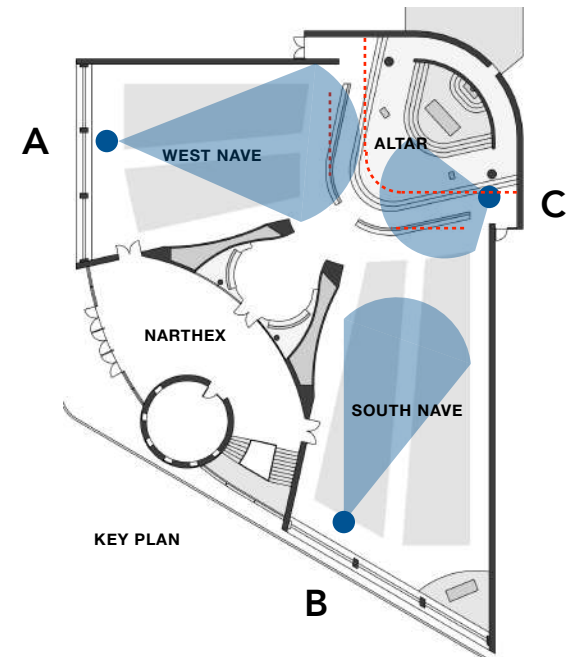
**A** Looking from the rear of the west nave, towards the mosaic reredos and altar.



**B** Looking from the rear of the south nave, towards the mosaic reredos.



**C** (Left) Looking from the altar towards the west nave and choir loft.





## PLAN ORGANIZATION

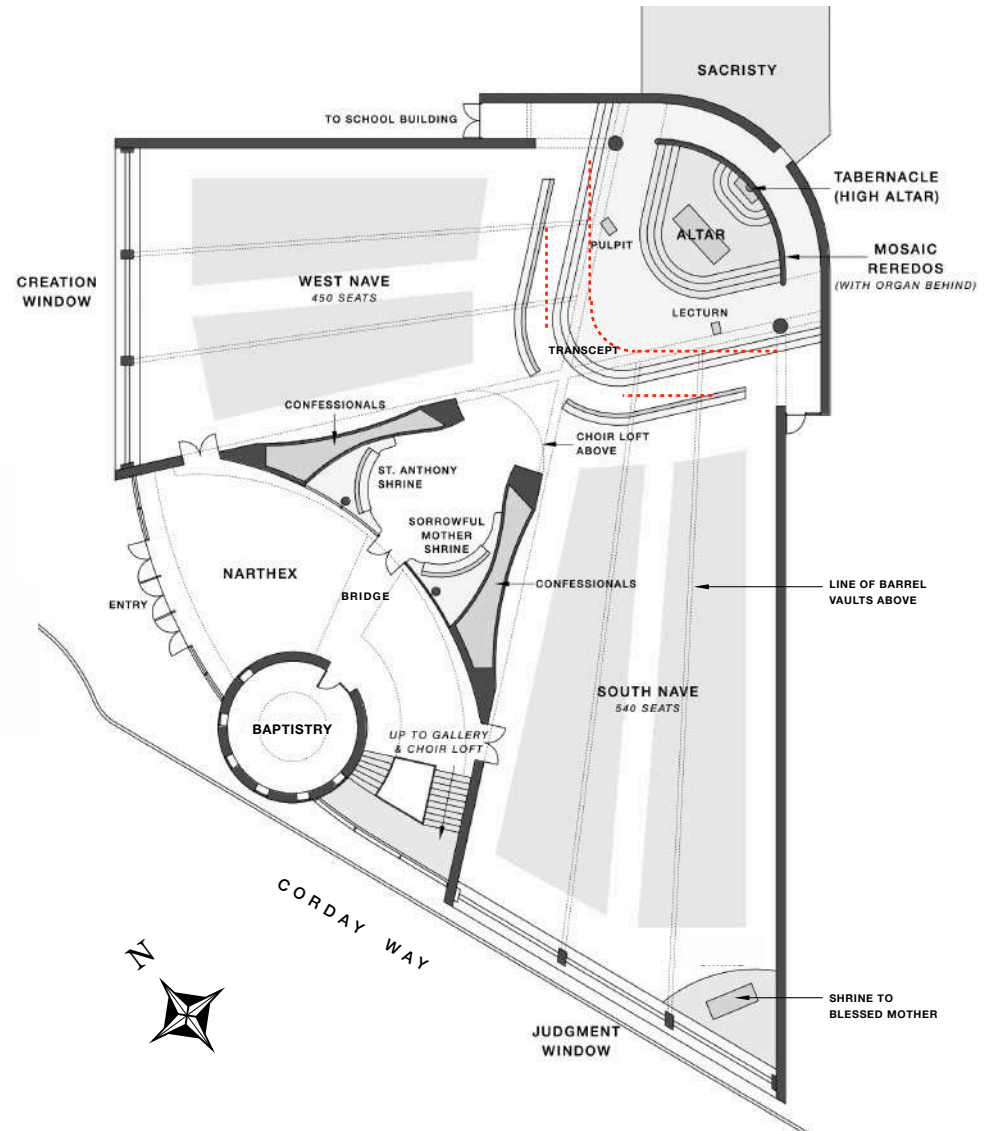
The church is organized into six distinct spaces: the narthex, baptistry, shrine chapel, west nave, south nave, and the altar.

The plan is arranged to ensure that parishioners' attention is consistently directed towards the altar, tabernacle, and mosaic reredos. Two sets of towering stained glass windows—the west facing Creation Window and the south facing Judgment Window—bathe each nave in colored light without detracting from the focal point at the altar. Services held at noon or dusk, especially in the spring and autumn, are particularly transcendent due to the quality of light streaming through these windows.

The spatial volume within the naves is shaped in a forced-perspective manner to maintain focus on the altar. Starting from the highest point of the stained glass windows at 42 feet, the barrel-vaulted ceilings and walls gradually taper inward, converging upon the altar and mosaic reredos. The floating ceiling above the altar is positioned at approximately 27 feet above the marble predella.

To enhance the concave effect, the walls and barrel vaults are adorned with over one million circular ceramic tiles. These tiles progress from darker earth tones near the stained glass windows to lighter tones as they approach the altar, symbolizing enlightenment. The curved wall behind the altar and mosaic reredos is entirely white and crafted from the same circular tiles.

Notably, many design elements of the church are arranged in groups of three to pay homage to the Holy Trinity. The stained glass window bays and the barrel vaults serving as prominent expressions of this symbolic theme. [11]

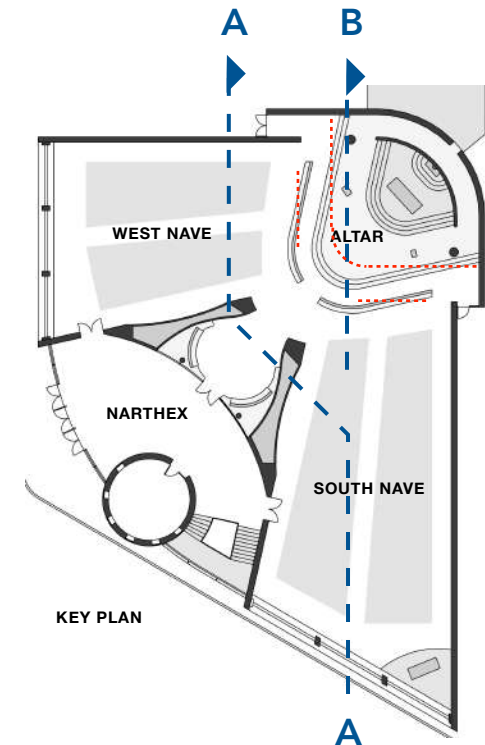
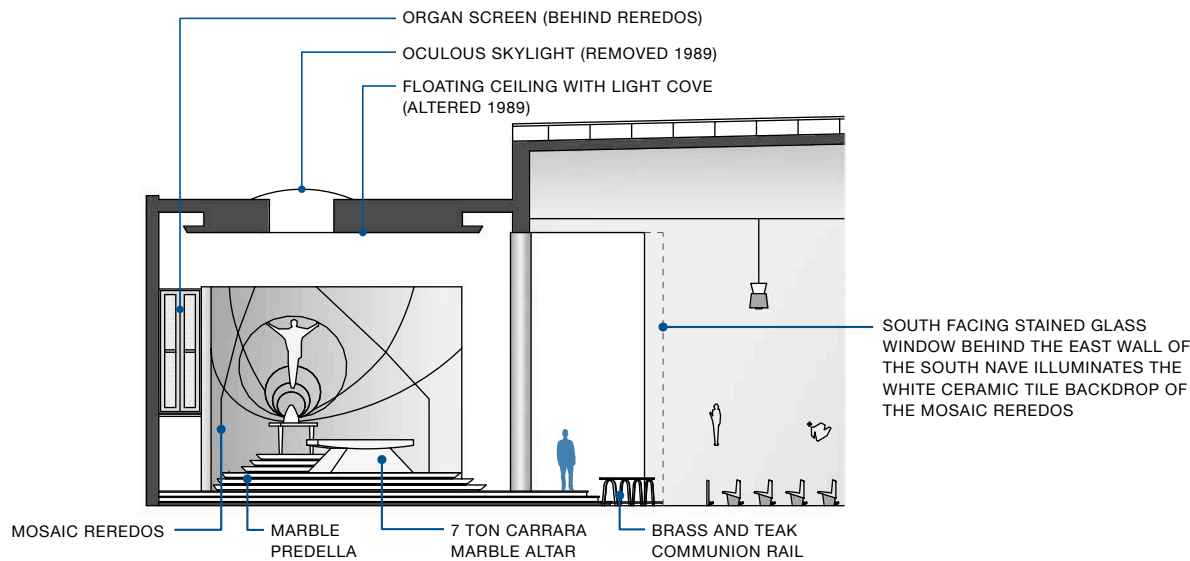
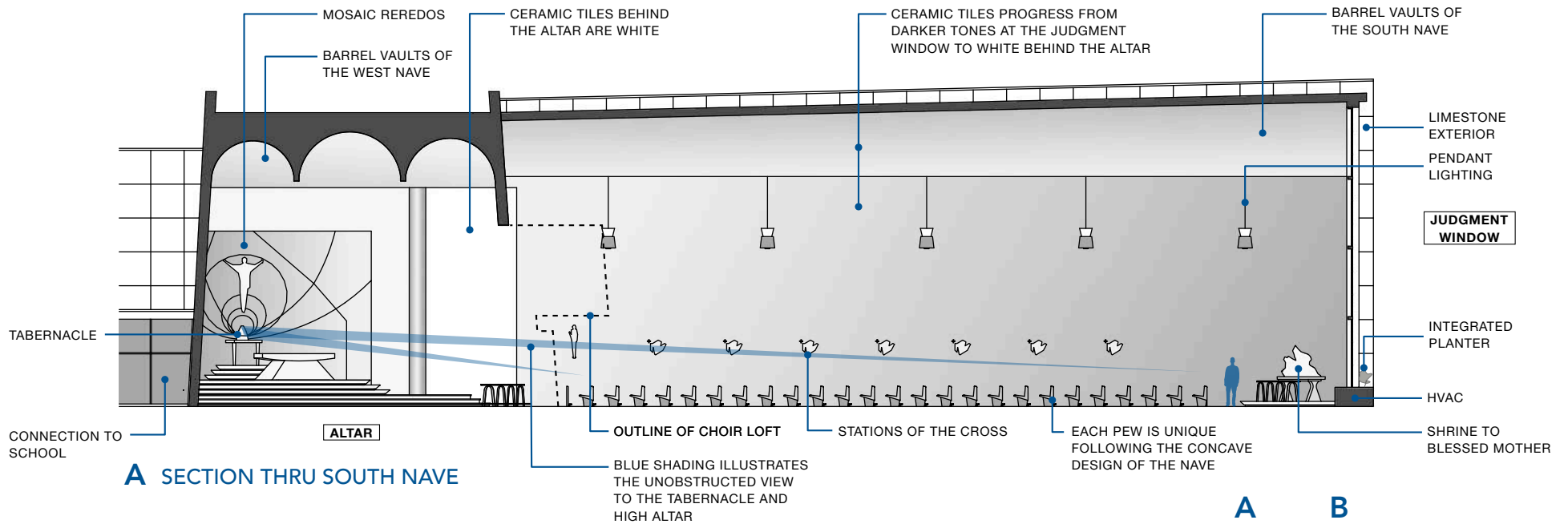


*The plan for the church illustrates the dynamic arrangement of space on a complex urban site with a demanding building program.*

*Plan illustration by Greg Weimerskirch*



# BUILDING SECTIONS



Section illustrations from a site survey conducted by Greg Weimerskirch, March 2022

## ARCHITECTS

The church was designed by brothers Edo J. Belli (1918-2003), principal architect, with Anthony J. Belli (1924-2007), associate architect, of Belli + Belli Architects, Chicago. This project is among their numerous religious works for the Catholic Church in North America. [13]

In 1957, a building committee of parishioners, led by Pastor Anthony Farina, selected the brothers based on their extensive portfolio with the Diocese of Chicago. Dominic J. Pronio, the principal nominator's late grandfather, served on the selection committee and fondly recalled their Catholic and Italian heritage as major contributing factors. [14]

Edo J. Belli, born on Chicago's North Side, served as the primary designer for all of Belli + Belli's projects. His brother, Anthony J. Belli, focused on engineering and project administration. Edo graduated from the Armour Institute of Technology in 1939 and gained experience at Graham, Anderson, Probst & White and Perkins & Will before establishing his own practice in 1949. Edo also contributed to the United States Navy Construction Battalion during World War II while stationed in Guam. Anthony attended the University of Illinois and the Institute of Design in Chicago. [15]

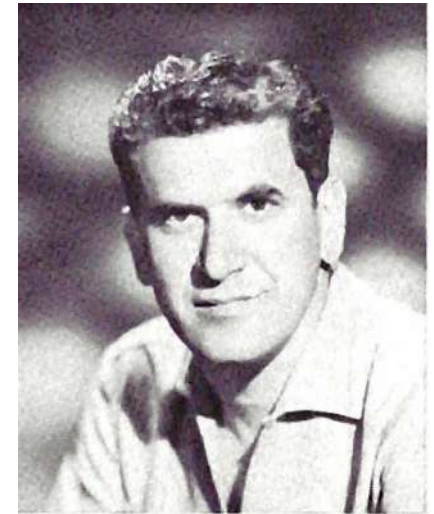
The Belli brothers cultivated an enduring relationship with Chicago Archbishop Samuel Stritch, securing commissions for numerous churches and schools within the expanding archdiocese. Archbishop Stritch endorsed the Belli brothers' early commitment to innovative engineering and a distinctively modernist style. [16]

Archbishop Stritch also introduced the Belli's to financier John F. Cuneo, Sr., who hired the Belli's for multiple projects, including the 1957 Frank Cuneo Memorial Hospital, which was recently demolished after a long preservation battle. The Belli's single major remaining work is the 13-story Saint Joseph's Hospital on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, completed in 1963. [17]

Belli + Belli operated extensively, undertaking projects in nearly every state and internationally in Italy, Spain, and France. At the peak of its success, the firm had a staff of over 50 architects. [18]



*Anthony J. Belli*



*Edo J. Belli*



## DALLE de VERRE WINDOWS

The monumental stained glass windows of Immaculate Conception Church are undoubtedly its most significant feature. These windows measure nearly 42 feet tall (equivalent to about 4 stories) at their highest point in the center of each nave. The south nave's Judgment Window spans 68 feet in width at its base, while the west nave's Creation Window is 61 feet wide.

Roy Calligan, the design director at the Hunt Stained Glass Studio in Pittsburgh, crafted the designs for the Creation and Judgment windows. Roy had previously worked for the August Miller Studio and the Conrad Schmitt Studios, both of which were responsible for designing much of the church's statuary and furnishings. He left Hunt Studio in 1967 to establish his own practice. [19]

Nicholas Parrendo, who joined Hunt Studio in 1950, designed the baptistry windows and the etched glass entry doors installed during the 1989 church renovation. Nicholas became the owner of the studio in 1987 and served as its chief designer until his passing in 2016.

Hunt Stained Glass Studio is still in operation and is now owned by Nicholas' children, David and Celeste. David has confirmed that the original drawings for the windows are preserved in the Hunt Studio archive. [20]

The windows were crafted in the Dalle de Verre technique, developed by artist Jean Gaudin in Paris in the 1930s. The method utilizes one inch-thick pieces of colored glass, which are chipped at the edges (or faceted) to enhance their brilliance. After the glass is cut, the pieces are arranged in a wooden form. An epoxy resin is then poured into the form to set the glass in place. The resulting panels are then assembled together to form the window. [21]

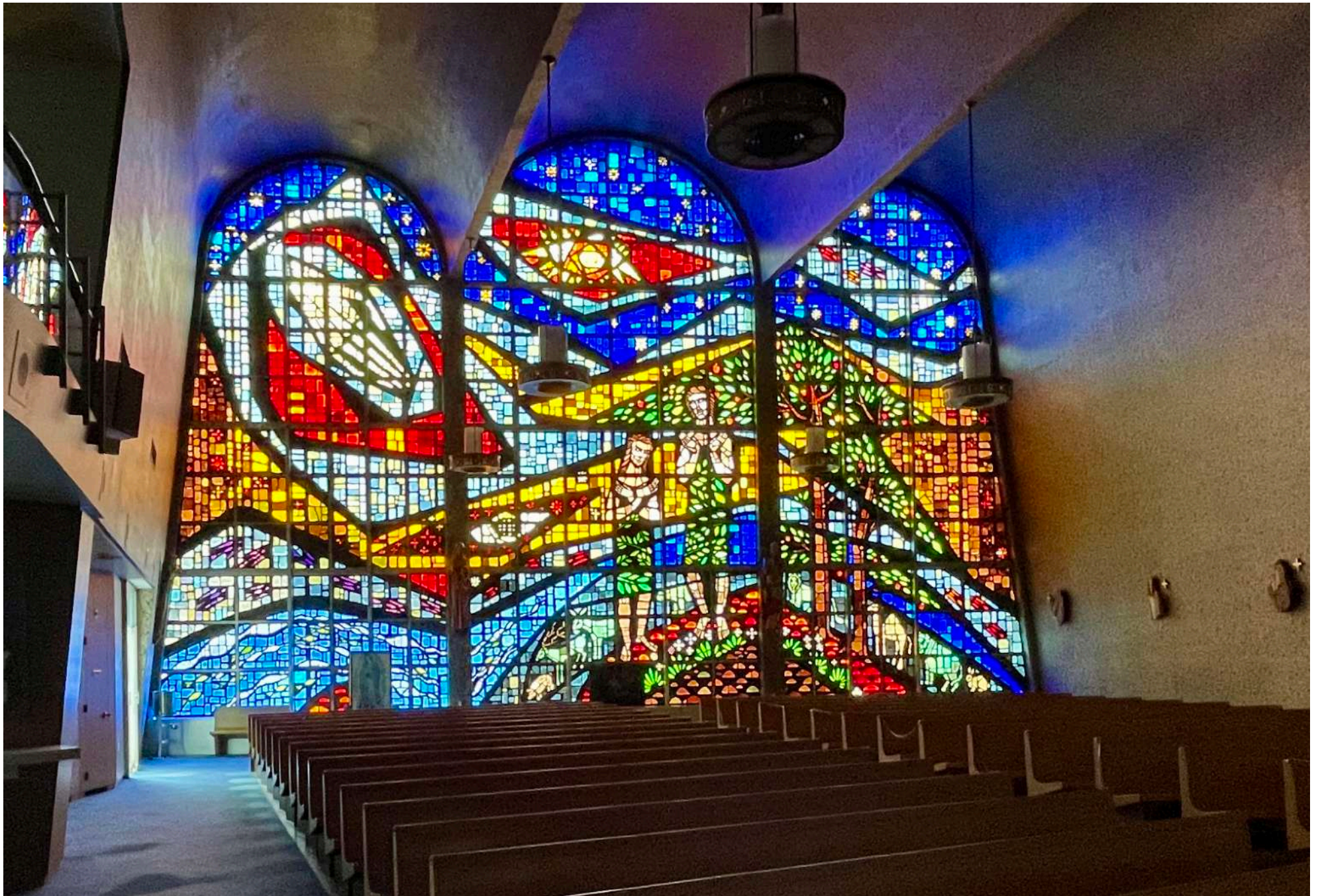


*The Creation Window in the west nave.*



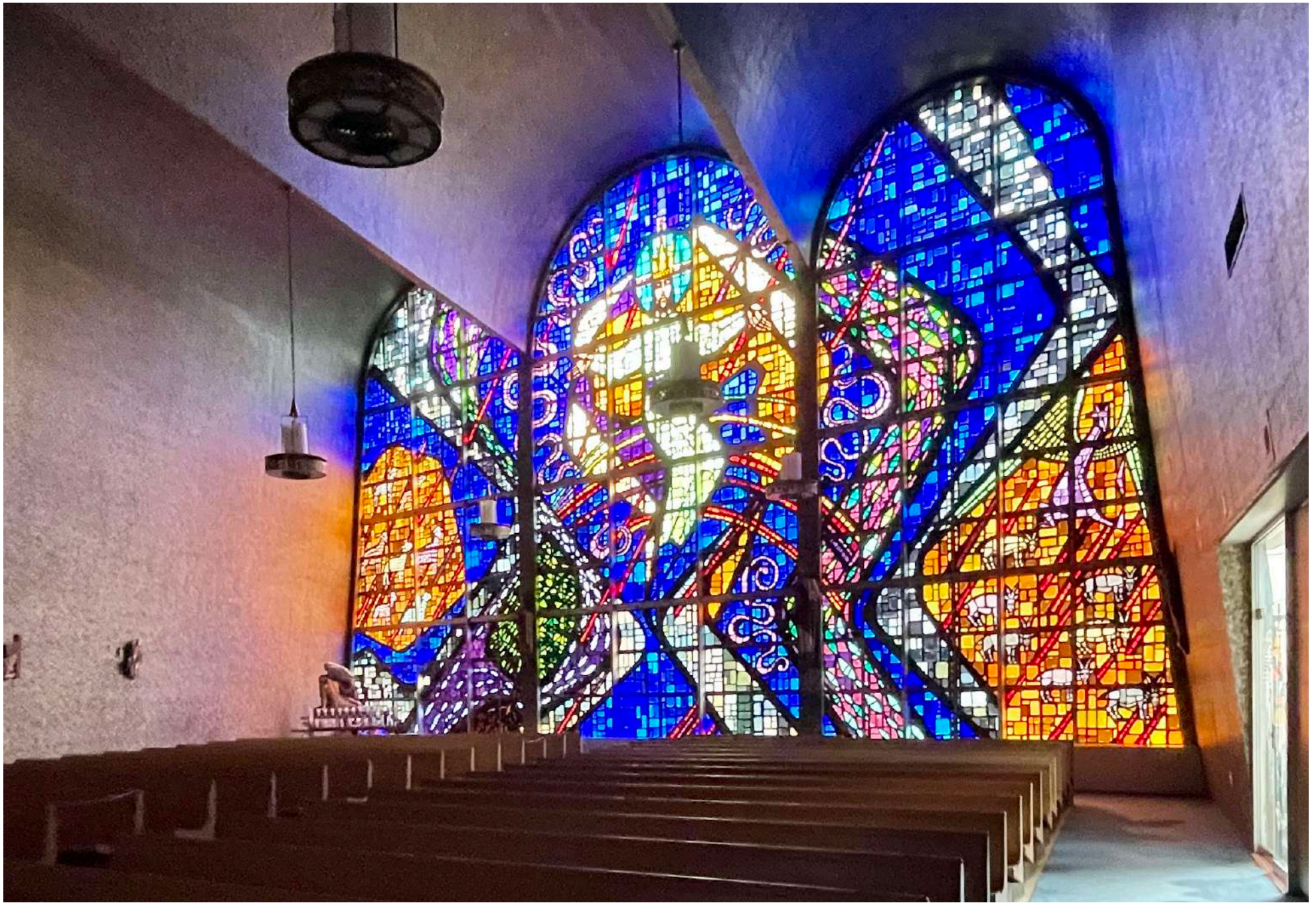
*The Judgment Window in the south nave.*





*The Creation Window in the west nave portrays the story of Adam and Eve and the genesis of life on earth utilizing bands of blue, yellow, and red glass, organized in an angular horizontal pattern. The left side of the window features the Hand of God, reaching out to Adam and Eve at the center, symbolizing divine connection. Scattered throughout the composition are depictions of the sun, stars, trees, and diverse animals, symbolizing the abundance of the newly formed world. [8]*



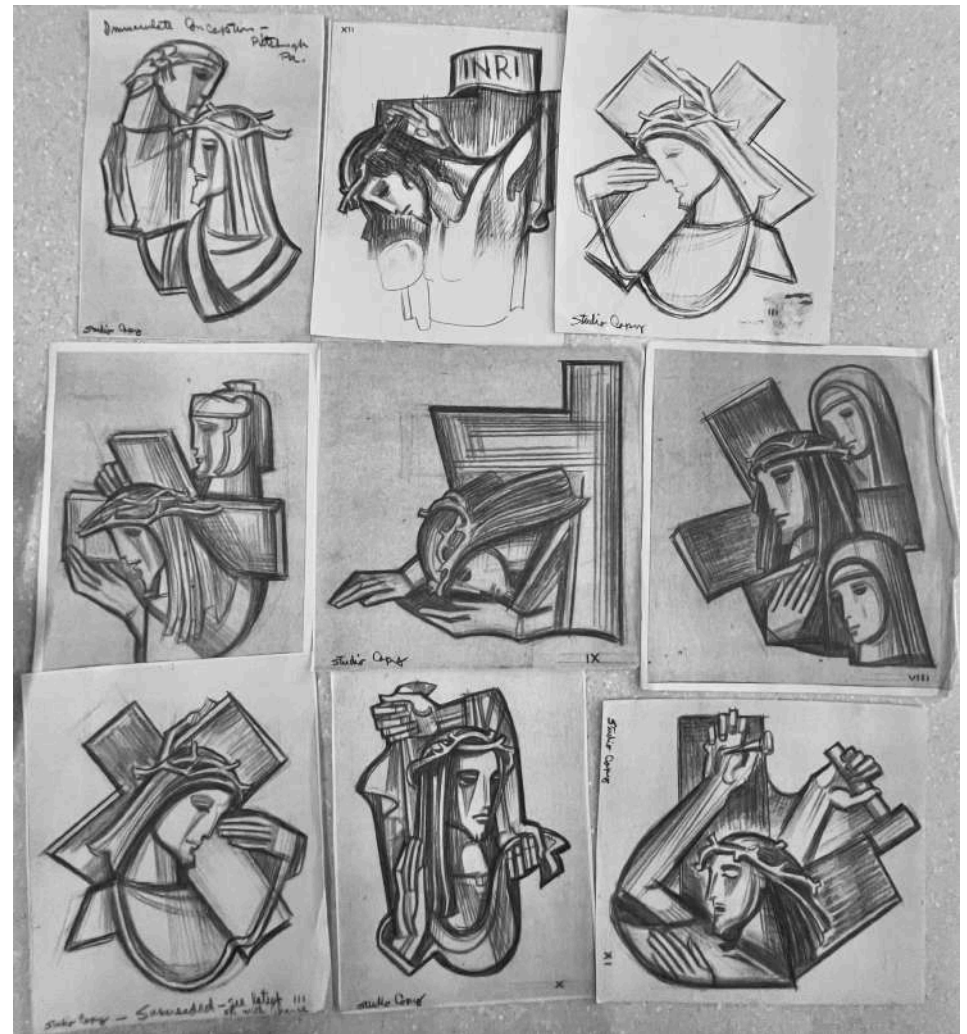


*The Judgment Window in the south nave depicts the anticipated return of Jesus Christ. Vertical arrangements of blue, purple, and orange glass provide contrast to the horizontal red and gold bands found in the Creation Window. The blue glass symbolizes the water of life, offering sustenance to the faithful. Within the water, serpents and an illustration of Satan in the form of a dragon are visually subdued by the descending figure of Christ. [8]*



## STATUARY — CONRAD SCHMITT STUDIOS

The church's statuary, including the bas-relief panels of the Stations of the Cross that line each nave, were designed by Bernard Gruenke of the Conrad Schmitt Studios in New Berlin, Wisconsin. Established in Milwaukee in 1889 by Conrad Schmitt, the studio remained in the Schmitt family until 1953. At that point, Bernard Gruenke acquired the firm. The studio continues its operations to this day, having created numerous works for churches, museums, and public buildings across the country. Notable projects include contributions to the National Cathedral, the White House, and Union Station in Washington, DC.



Original sketches for the Stations of the Cross by Bernard Gruenke from the Conrad Schmitt Studio Archives.



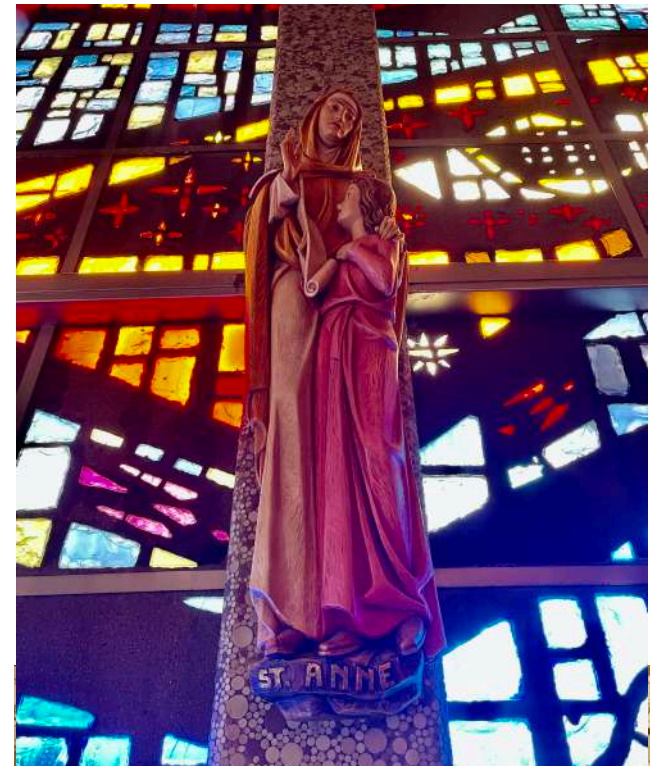
## STATUARY

Most of the statues in the church were intricately carved from Italian lindenwood by Vincenzo Mussner in Ortisei, Italy. Initially, the statues were adorned with a gold-toned lacquer finish, but during the 1989 renovation, they were repainted in color (artist unknown). [22]

The design of the sanctuary lamp, tabernacle, and altar furniture was entrusted to the Conrad Schmitt Studios and expertly crafted in brass with gold plating by Johannes Schlutter of West Berlin, Germany.



*Statuary in the church was originally gold toned.*



*Detail of a Station of the Cross bas-relief. Note the circular ceramic tiles behind the sculpture. There are over one million of these tiles on the walls and barrel vaults of the church.*

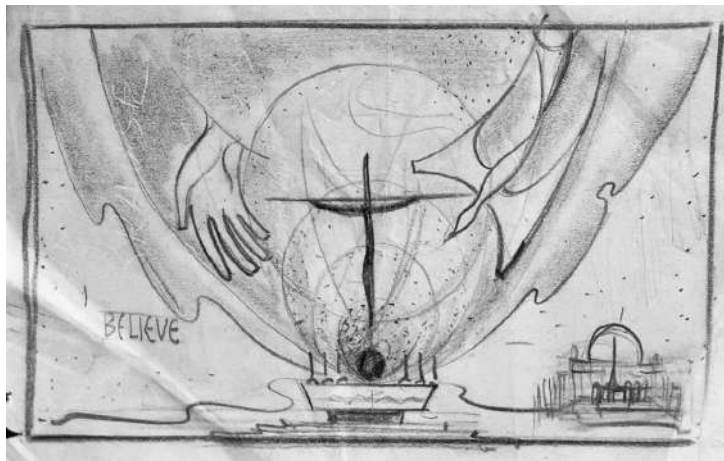
## MOSAIC REREDOS

Designed by Bernard Gruenke and fabricated by the August Wagner Company, West Germany. The mosaic reredos contains thousands of mosaic tiles ranging from 3/8" to 2" square in size. The gold mosaics were created by sandwiching 24k gold leaf sheets between two layers of glass.

Focused around the theme of the Apostles' Creed, the mosaic depicts the Hand of God on the left side of the crucifix, with the Holy Spirit represented by a dove on the right. Radiating from the tabernacle, expanding circles symbolize the holy host. The words "I Believe" and "And Life Everlasting — Amen" frame the mosaic.



The mosaic at the time of the church's dedication with the crucifix above the tabernacle.



Preliminary Sketch by Bernard Gruenke from the Conrad Schmitt Studio Archives.



Detailed acrylic painting of the final design by Bernard Gruenke from the Conrad Schmitt Studio Archives.

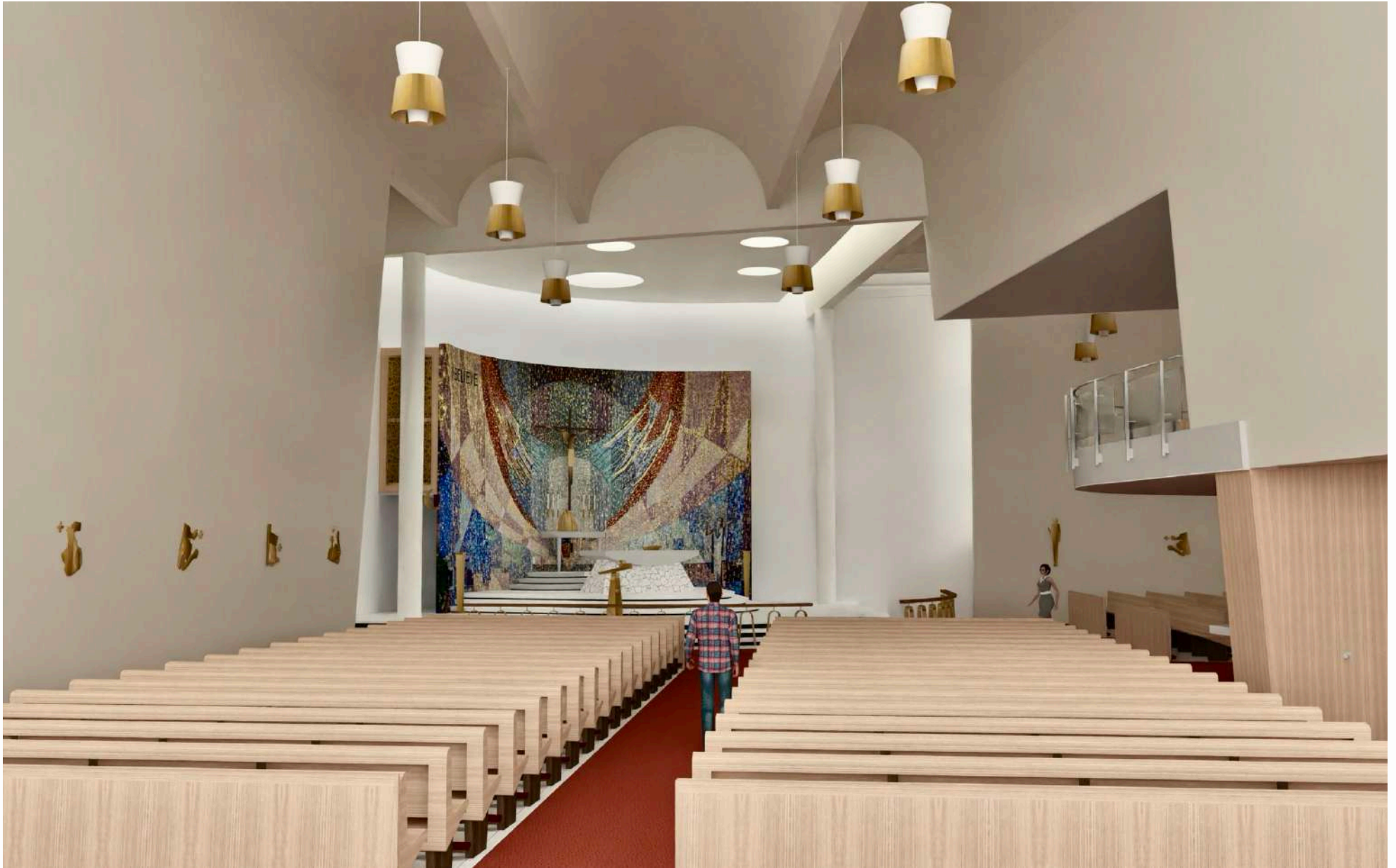




Above the mosaic, there was a large Oculus skylight designed to let sunlight illuminate the tabernacle and crucifix (later replaced by the Risen Jesus statue). During the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, sunlight would cast its rays almost directly onto the radiating circles in the mosaic. As part of the 1989 renovation, both the skylights and the original crucifix were removed.



## 1989 ALTERATIONS



*Digital model of the west nave illustrating the church before alterations.*

*The 1989 renovation altered some of the distinctive architectural features of the church. A large oculus skylight positioned directly above the altar, accompanied by three smaller skylights, was replaced with mechanical vents to accommodate increased capacity of the HVAC system. Mid-afternoon sun in the summer would strike the cross and mosaic reredos in a dramatic fashion which caused the 24k gold tiles to shimmer.*



## 1989 ALTERATIONS

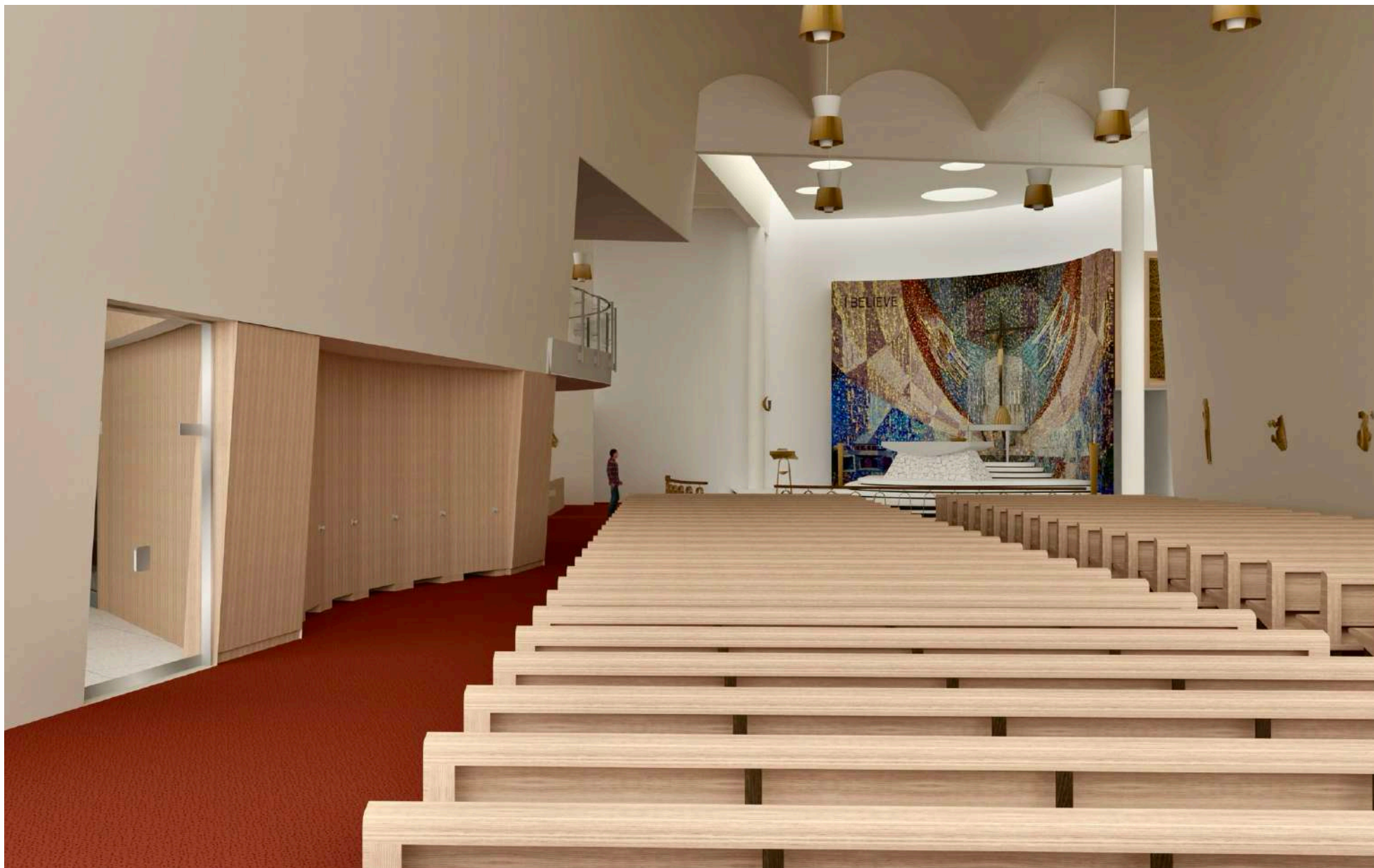


3D model of the altar illustrating the church before alterations.

The renovation also changed the original interior color scheme. The warm-white tile on the curved wall behind the mosaic reredos was painted a glossy white and the tall columns that support the vaulted roof were painted sky blue. Ruby-colored carpeting, which highlighted the red tones in the altar mosaic and stained glass windows, was replaced with light blue carpeting.



## 1989 ALTERATIONS



*3D model of the south nave illustrating the church before alterations.*

*The renovation also replaced the mid-century pendant lighting in the naves. The lower portion of the pendants had a brass shade punctuated with tiny holes which created a dramatic starlight effect during evening services. Concealed lighting around the perimeter of the altar's floating ceiling was also removed.*



## DEMOLITION THREAT

Immaculate Conception Church faces an urgent threat, as highlighted in a report presented to the church's advisory council by the independent building consultant, PEA Group of Detroit. Although the current structural integrity of the building is sound, there is a pressing need for a new roof. Roof leaks have already led to the failure of ceiling plaster in several areas, and cracks have emerged in the ceramic tiles surrounding the choir loft and at the base of the barrel vaults. Failure to address these issues promptly may compromise the rebar encased within the structure. [25]

Beyond the physical challenges, the neighborhood of Bloomfield and the East End of Pittsburgh in general have experienced substantial development pressure over the past decade.

The church is part of a campus that includes a convent, a large 3-story school building with 16 classrooms and a gym, and a large playground and parking lot. As assembled, these elements alone will provide a highly desirable development site. The campus also sits next to a large public parking lot that is owned by the City of Pittsburgh. It is not unreasonable to assume that this parking lot could be included with the church property to create a substantial development parcel (albeit, public parking would have to be contained within the new development).

Furthermore, the church campus is strategically located one half-block from The Western Pennsylvania Hospital, which has been acquiring neighboring properties for future development.

Lastly, a major concern for the building's future is the slim likelihood of its reuse by another religious organization. Given its unique design, adapting the structure poses a substantial challenge.

Furthermore, the Diocese of Pittsburgh requires the removal of all religious objects, with no exception. In 1996, St. John the Baptist Church in the Lawrenceville neighborhood of Pittsburgh was sold by the diocese and adapted into a brew pub. At that time, the diocese did not remove the stained glass windows or murals from the church. The owners of the brew pub kept the windows and placed beer fermentation vessels on the altar. Although striking in design for the brew pub, it understandably upset the diocese. Since then, all religious artifacts must be removed from a church building upon closure.

The removal of the altar mosaic and stained glass windows at Immaculate Conception poses a formidable challenge. These artistic elements are intricately embedded into the structure, making their extraction difficult, if not entirely feasible.

It is not unrealistic to speculate that the diocese would rather see the building demolished and the site redeveloped for another use altogether, as has happened to St. Lawrence O'Toole Church in Garfield.





## ADAPTIVE REUSE

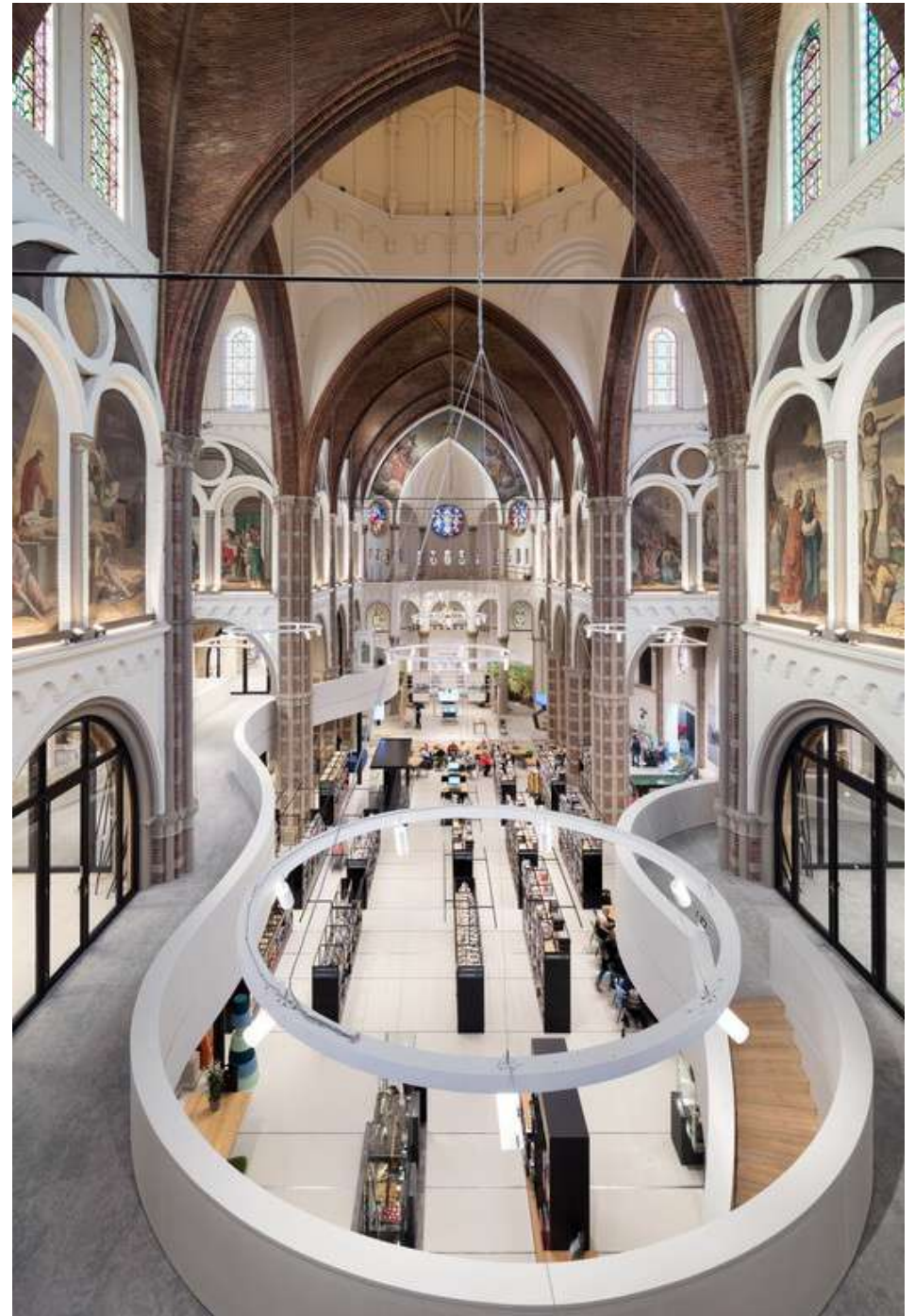
Adaptive reuse presents a challenge for Immaculate Conception, yet it remains within the realm of possibility. A potential redevelopment plan could repurpose the school for housing, while the church is repurposed into a community event space or serve as a collaborative open-office environment, meeting the demands of tech companies in search of space in Pittsburgh. Alternatively, a more ambitious vision might involve transforming the church into a satellite gallery for The Carnegie Museum of Art or a studio for another arts-based organization.

Pittsburgh has numerous examples of older churches that were expressly repurposed, including The Priory on Pittsburgh's North Side and the Union Project in Highland Park.

Globally, there are striking examples of church conversions that effectively preserve the finest features of original religious architecture while adapting the space to a new and vibrant purpose.



*Saint-Denis-du-plateau 1964, Quebec, Canada, office conversion, 2012  
Hanganu Architects with Leahy Cadras Architects*



*De Petrus Community Center and Library 2015, Paris, France  
Molennar & Dillen Architects*



## PRESERVATION PENNSYLVANIA

Buildings of the recent past are easily disregarded without consideration for architectural merit or community sentiment. The threat to Immaculate Conception Church is worthy of public attention for its architectural and engineering value, for the legacy of those who built the church, and for those who have utilized its sanctuary for more than six decades.

Building a groundswell of public support, along with garnering backing from the preservation community, including Preservation Pennsylvania, marks the initial crucial step in finding a creative reuse for the building. The decision to close the church has taken many by surprise, allowing very little time to formulate a plan of action for its preservation. The internal study conducted by the parish and diocese over a two year period was not made public until mid-February 2022. Additionally, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Immaculate Conception's grade school operated with a modest enrollment, providing little indication that the church would face closure.

Bishop Zubik's decree, outlined in the attached appendix, outlines the immediate actions upon the church's closure:

"In accordance with our diocesan norms, I also decree that the stained glass windows, sacred items, non-sacred artifacts, and any work of some significance be removed to the extent possible for reuse in other sacred edifices in the parish or be transmitted to the Diocesan Archives for use by other ecclesiastical entities.

This decree is effective at 12:01 AM on May 2, 2022." [24]



*With the roof failing, plaster ceilings have begun to spall and break apart (upper right corner). Ceramic tiles are also beginning to fail.*



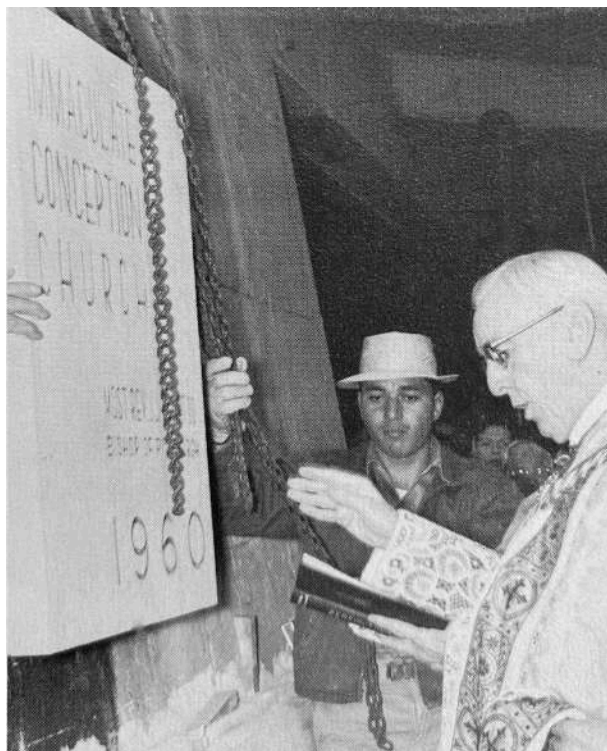
© Amy Fisher



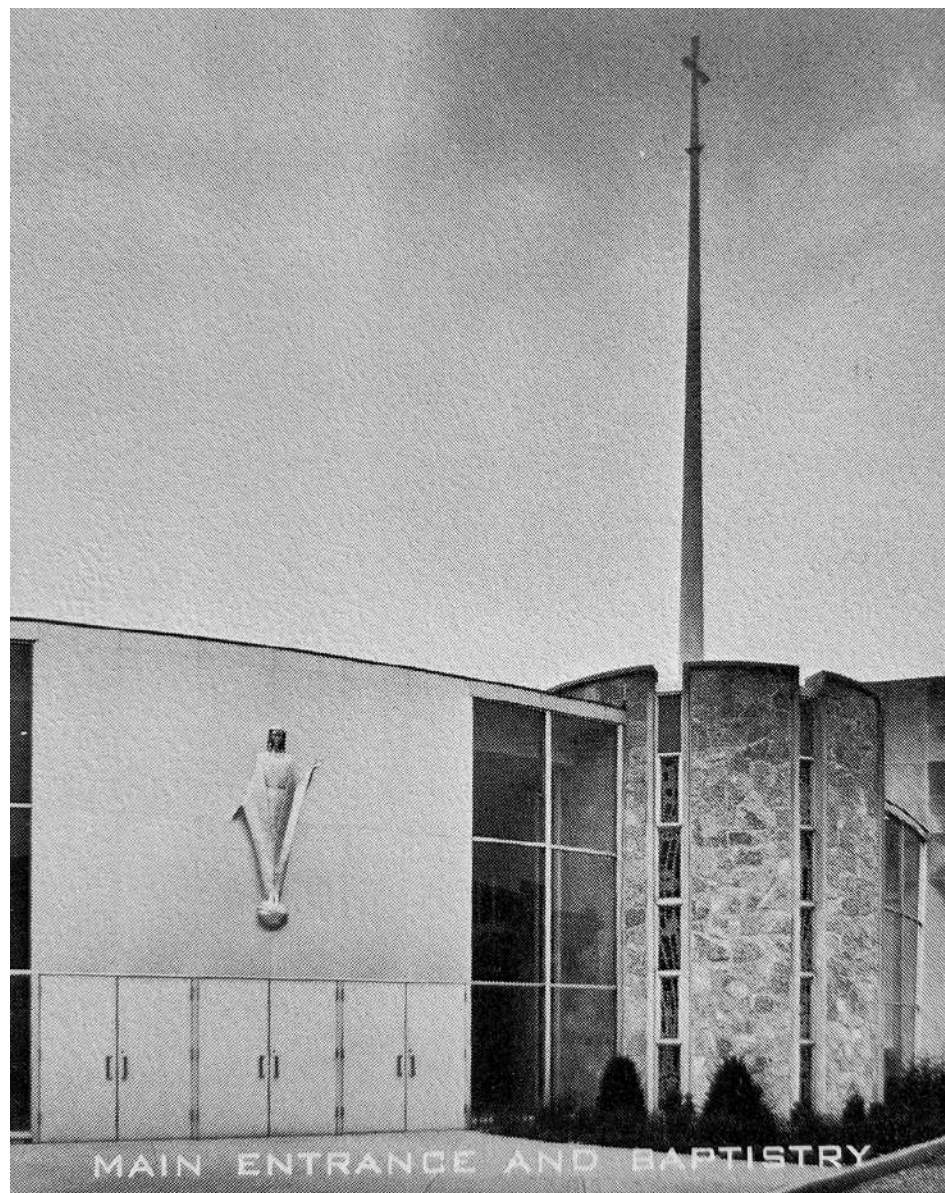
## CHURCH DEDICATION PHOTOS

The black and white photographs on the following pages are from the 1963 church dedication booklet and were taken by Alfred Cardell of the Cardell Portrait Studio in Bloomfield. Mr. Cardell was a member of the Immaculate Conception parish until his death in January 1986. [26]

The photos show the church in its most pristine architectural form, which the church remained in until the 1989 renovation.



*Blessing of the corner stone by Monsignor Henry Carlin, 23 October 1960*

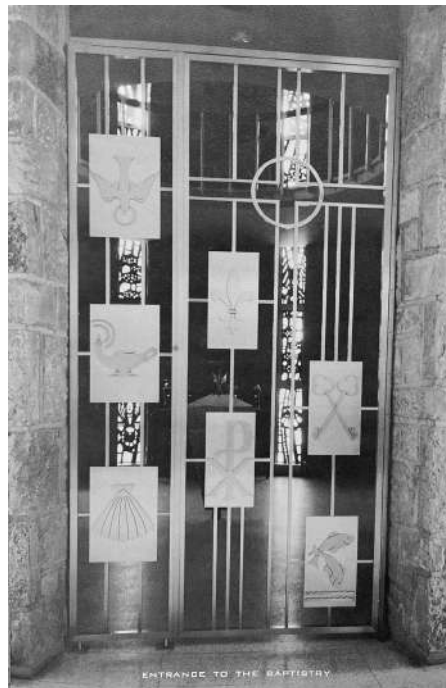


*The entry doors to the narthex were originally solid so that the sanctuary was revealed slowly. They were replaced in 1989 with glass doors. It would have been difficult to get a full view of the church exterior soon after construction as the parish had not finished acquiring the block of houses across the street.*

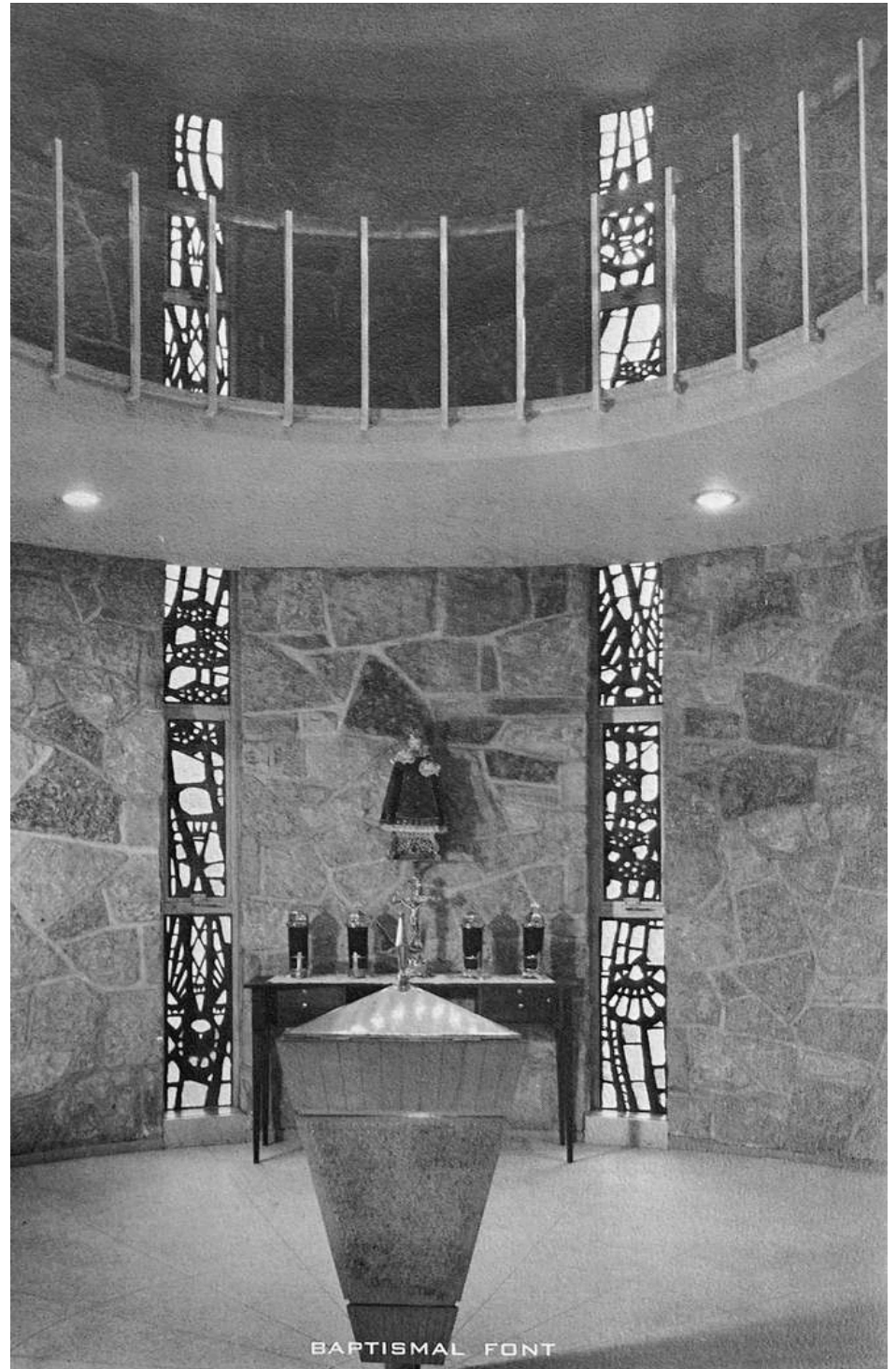




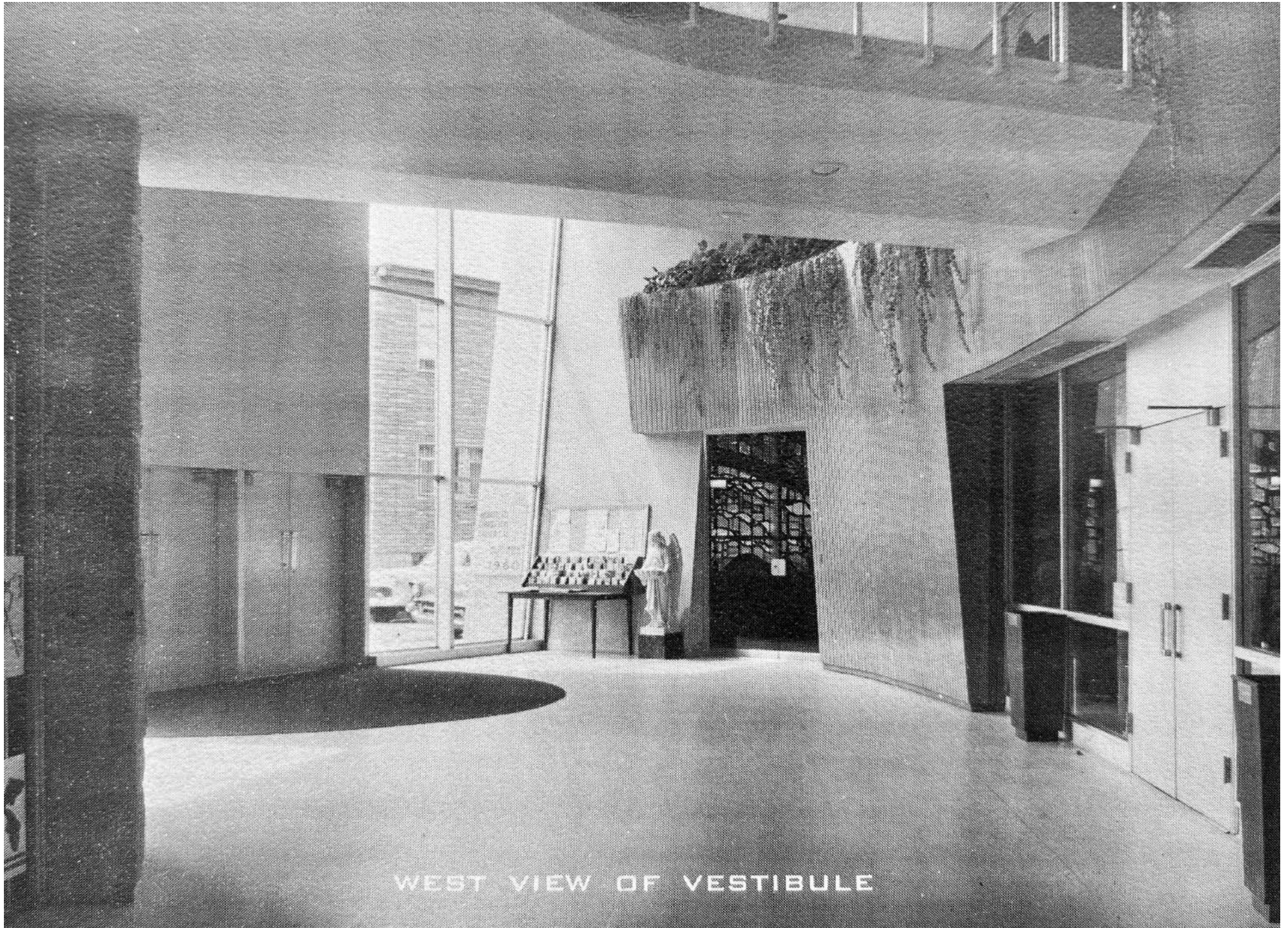
The narthex remains basically the same today. The baptistry was converted into a mediation chapel, although the original baptismal font was removed.



The baptistry has a viewing gallery on the second level. The brass and aluminum door to the baptistry was designed by Bernard Gruenke of Conrad Schmitt Studios.







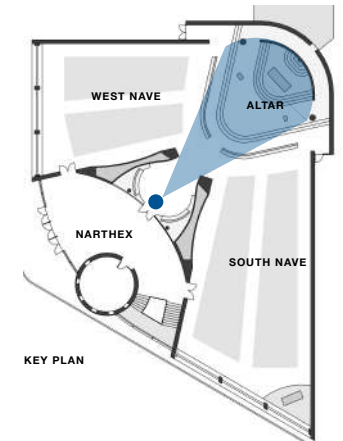
WEST VIEW OF VESTIBULE

*Note the house across the street through the window. The church had not yet purchased the block of houses for the school playground and parking lot.*





Architect Edo J. Belli mentions that the center aisle, which was used during formal services such as weddings and funerals, was to “reveal the sanctuary in a dramatic fashion, much like the narthex of a cathedral.” [27] The door to the center aisle is solid (just like the entry doors to the church) so that the sanctuary remains mostly concealed to the viewer. The 10 foot ceiling of the center aisle gives way to the nearly 40 foot ceilings of the naves and altar.



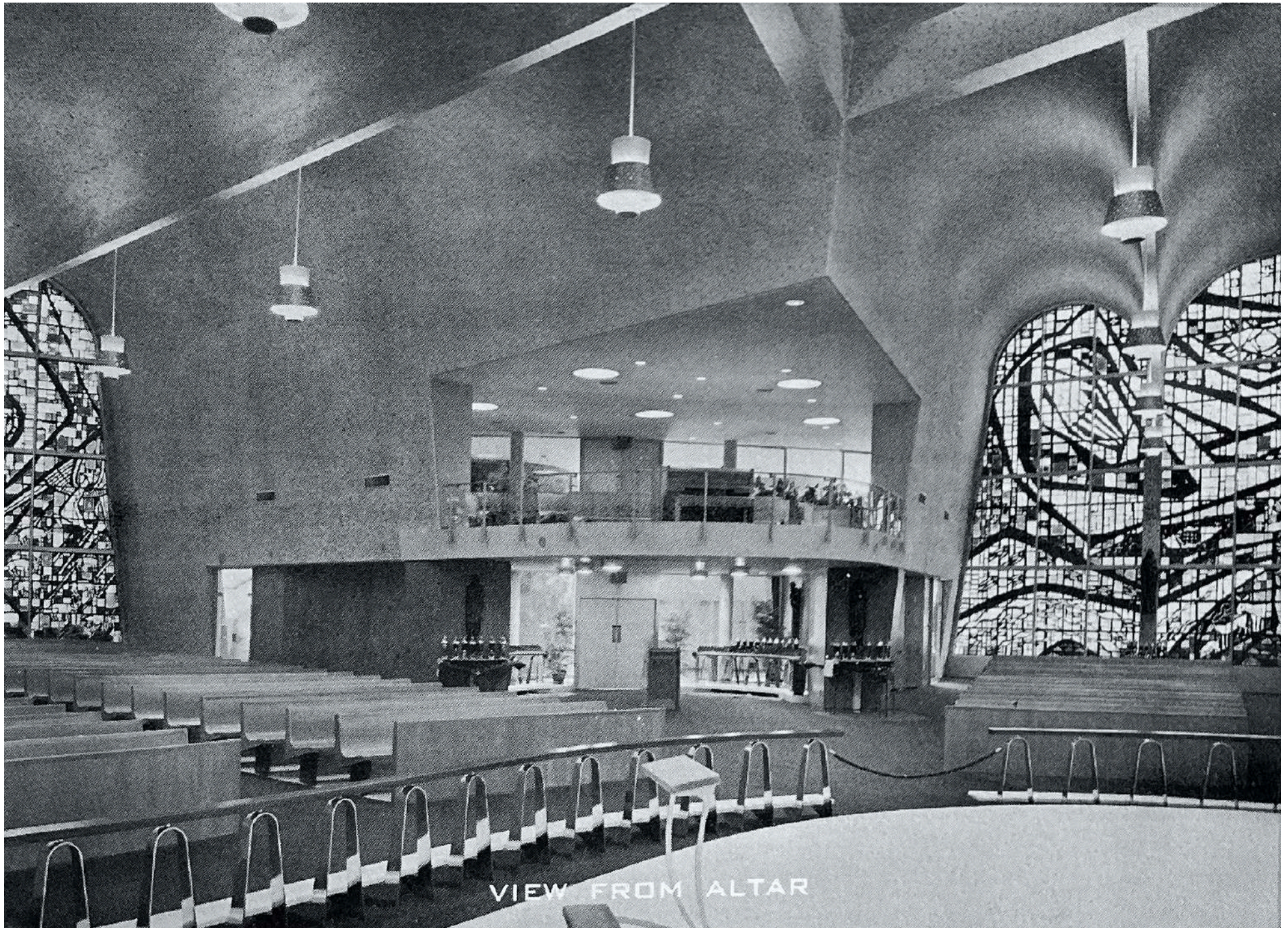
Top photo by Greg Weimerskirch





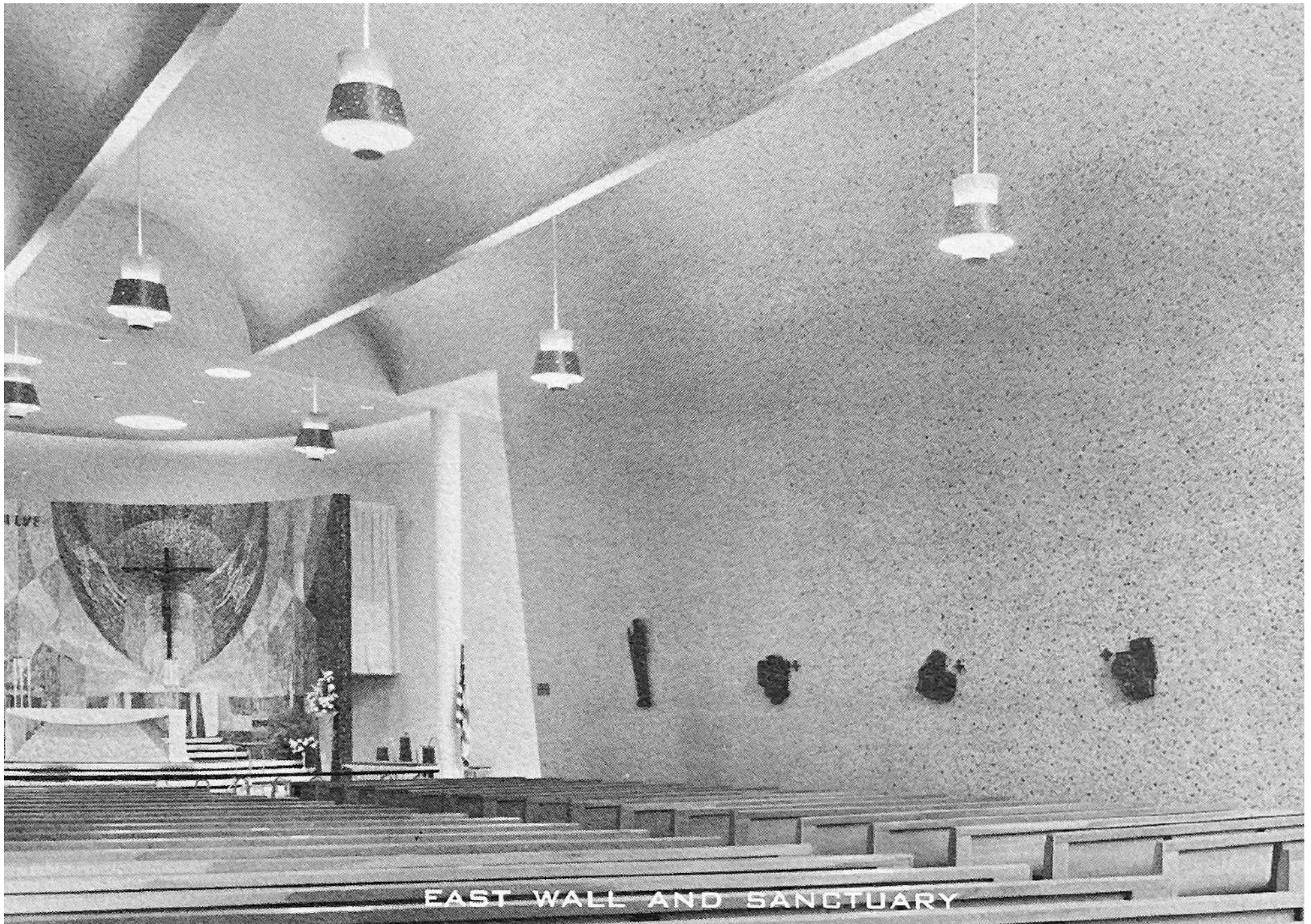
Looking from the choir loft. The screens to the organ chamber behind the reredos are not yet installed. The wood crucifix was moved to the narthex in 1989.





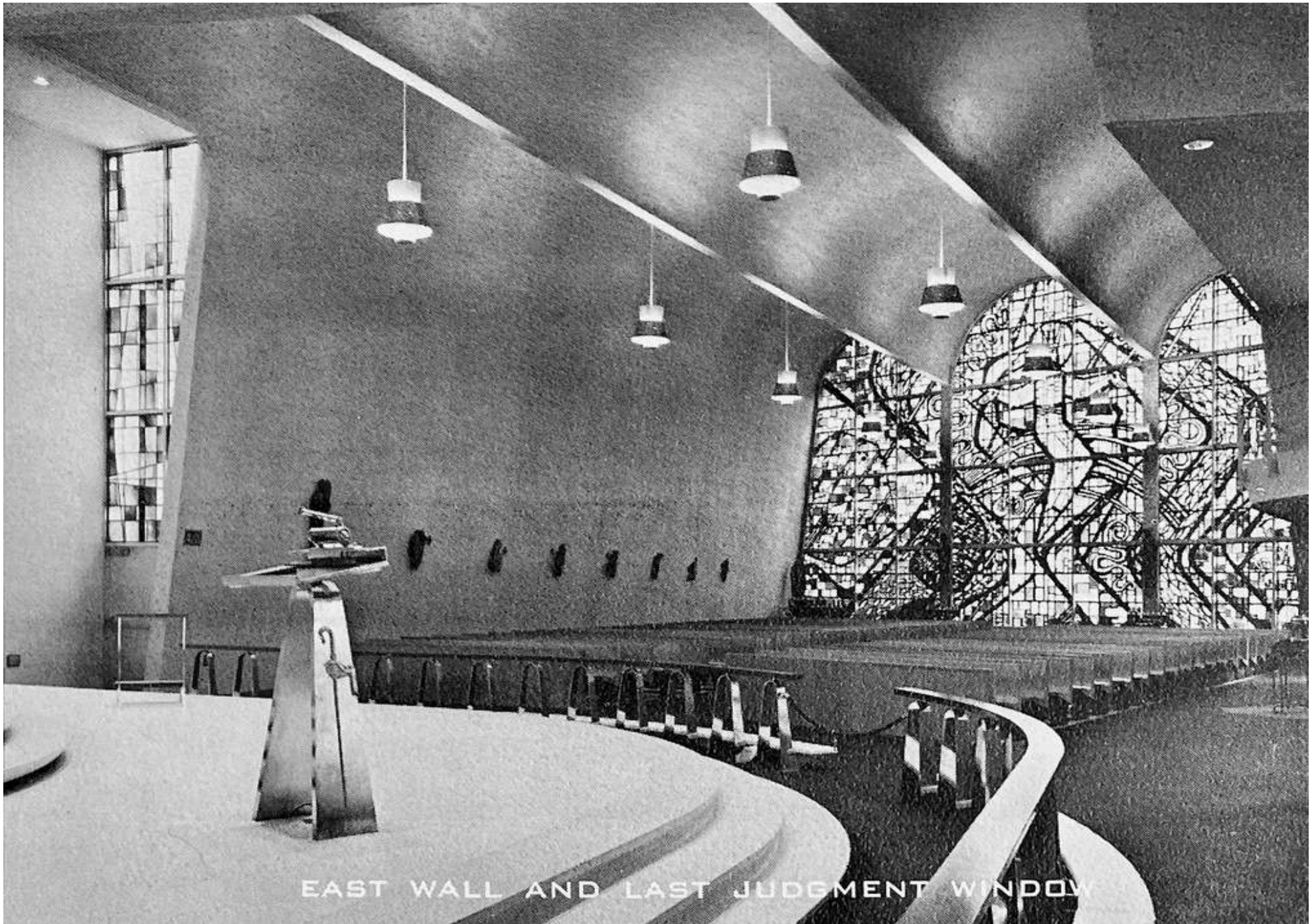
*The complexity of the structure is most evident in this view. The barrel vaulted ceilings and sloping walls of the south and west naves intersect above the choir loft.*





*A rare photo showing the floating ceiling above the altar with the oculus and skylights intact. Also shown is the cove lighting. The removal of these items in 1989 was detrimental to the spiritual intent of the design. The current configuration of louvered panels and track lighting is haphazard and unsightly.*





EAST WALL AND LAST JUDGMENT WINDOW

*The original mid-century lighting for the church provided interesting areas of light and shadow. The lower portion of the pendants had a brass shade punctuated with tiny holes which created a starlight effect, especially in the evening. The original fixtures were replaced in 1989.*



# DECREE OF CHURCH CLOSING

DAVID ALLEN ZUBIK



By the Grace of God and the Authority of the Apostolic See  
BISHOP OF PITTSBURGH

## DECREE

### PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA AND THE REDUCTION OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CHURCH BUILDING OF SAINT MARIA GORETTI PARISH TO PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID USE.

Whereas, Immaculate Conception church located at 300 Edmond Street, Pittsburgh PA 15224, church of the former Immaculate Conception/Saint Joseph Parish, became part of the patrimony of the newly formed Saint Maria Goretti Parish with a decree issued on March 22, 2012 and effective on June 4, 2012, in accord with the norm of canon 122 §2.

Whereas, Saint Maria Goretti Parish was formed by the extinctive union of the former Immaculate Conception/Saint Joseph Parish and the former Saint Lawrence O'Toole Parish.

Whereas, the age and physical condition and maintenance of parish owned buildings, including church buildings, is beyond the ability of the parish to afford.

Whereas, the Immaculate Conception church building is in poor physical condition: among other things, major repairs are needed for the leaking roof of the building and the resulting water damage to the interior; repairs are required for the heating and air conditioning systems; abatement and removal of hazardous materials; all of which are projected to cost more than \$1.4 Million. Additionally, required maintenance of other buildings owned by the parish are projected to cost more than \$1.6 Million, which together amounts to more than \$3 Million, far exceeding the parish's ability to afford.

Whereas, due to diminished weekly Mass attendance and offertory collection, Saint Maria Goretti Parish has been operating by deficit spending, which needs to be curtailed in order to provide for the continued life of the parish.

Whereas, there is no other source of funding for the costs described above.

Whereas, Immaculate Conception church building is attached to and integrated within an unused school building which adds greatly to the cost of maintenance and upkeep and, therefore, to the cost of sustainability to the parish.

1

Whereas, the Immaculate Conception church building is not needed by Saint Maria Goretti Parish.

Whereas, parishioner input regarding the possible closure of the church buildings was sought on multiple occasions over several years, and a final parish assembly was held on February 2, 2022.

Whereas, on February 11, 2022, the Pastor of Saint Maria Goretti Parish, having consulted his parish Pastoral and Finance Councils, submitted a petition recommending the relegation to profane but not sordid use of Immaculate Conception church building in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Whereas, the care of souls will not be impacted as the members of Saint Maria Goretti Parish worship at the nearby Saint Joseph church building owned by the same parish and located less than 600 feet away from Immaculate Conception church building.


Whereas, the rationale for the closing Immaculate Conception church building for divine worship include the following: (1) the financial situation of the parish, including the parish's inability to continue maintaining two church buildings; (2) the need to reduce costs for the financial viability of the parish; (3) the required maintenance that this church building and other buildings owned by the parish currently need, the cost of which is beyond the ability of the parish to afford; (4) there is no other viable source of income to meet the costs; (5) the care of souls will not be greatly impacted because of the availability of another church building owned by the parish.


Therefore, having heard the Presbyteral Council on February 17, 2022 and the Vicars General on the same day and having received a unanimous favorable recommendation from both and in accord with the provisions of canon 1222 §2 of the *Code of Canon Law*, I hereby close for worship Immaculate Conception church building located at 300 Edmond Street, Pittsburgh PA 15224 and furthermore relegate to profane but not sordid use the same church building in accord with the norms of law.

In accordance with our diocesan norms, I also decree that the stained glass windows, sacred items, non-sacred artifacts and any work of some significance be removed to the extent possible for reuse in other sacred edifices in the parish or be transmitted to the Diocesan Archives for use by other ecclesiastical entities. This decree is effective at 12:01AM on May 2, 2022.

Finally, those who have the right, may appeal this decree in accordance with the prescriptions of the law.

Given at Pittsburgh this 25<sup>th</sup> day of March, in the Year of Our Lord 2022.

  
Most Reverend David A. Zubik  
Bishop of Pittsburgh

  
Ellen M. Mady  
Chancellor

2



## SOURCES

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A digital copy of the booklet is available by emailing the principal nominator, Greg Weimerskirch: [gregweimerskirch@mac.com](mailto:gregweimerskirch@mac.com)

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Saint Maria Goretti Parish Assembly, February 2, 2002 [24] [25]

Video presentation of findings for Immaculate Conception Church and Saint Joseph's Church by building consultant, PEA Group

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Recommendation for Closure of Immaculate Conception Church

<https://olasmg.org/documents/2022/2/Announcement%20of%20Building%20Recommendation%20.pdf>

Letter of Decree-Relegation of Immaculate Conception, David Zubik, Bishop of Pittsburgh [5] [24]

<https://olasmg.org/on-mission>



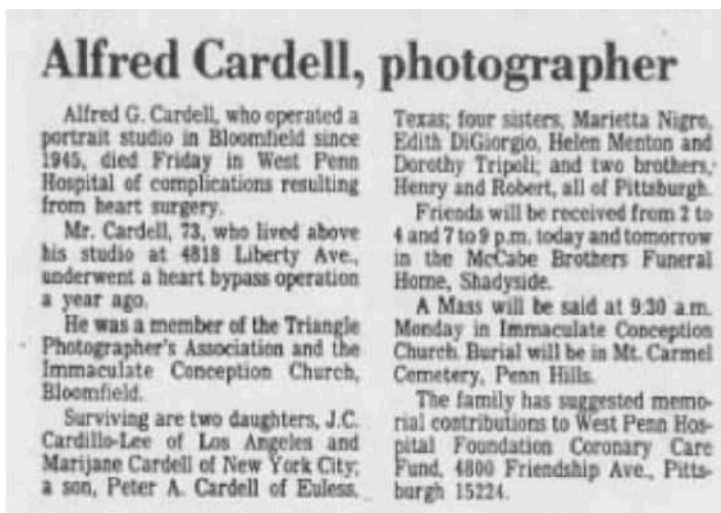
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<https://goo.gl/maps/wbMDBAd8xwPs6Gby5>

## REPRODUCTION OF IMAGERY

Black and white photography from the 1963 Immaculate Conception Church dedication booklet was taken by Alfred Cardell of the Cardell Studio in Bloomfield, Pittsburgh, PA. The studio closed before his death in 1986.



Pittsburgh Post Gazette, January 4, 1986 [26]

# 2022 PENNSYLVANIA AT RISK

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