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## the spirit of green

**Recently Awarded Leed Gold Certification, the Church for St. Gabriel's Passionist Parish in Toronto Might Well Be the Greenest Worship Space in Canada.**

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Architectural history, until the last century, is dominated by how humans have made manifest their theology through the built expression of sacred places. If the central position held by Egyptian and Greek temples gave way in Rome to a shared spotlight with other building types and even technical structures, much of the next 2000 years centres on the adaptation of that culture's secular basilica into the architectural triumphs of western Christianity. Even in the eclectic 19th century, a debate waged between British heavy-weight critics over whether Gothic (espoused by August Pugin and John Ruskin, for example) or classical (adherents included Charles Cockerell and John Soanes) styles best manifested the will of God.

The secularization of the modern era almost marginalized religious architecture. Ironically, however, when the so-called "International Style" turned banality into an art form, Christian church architecture often stood out as the most daring moments in the built environment. If post-modernism ushered in a short reactionary period, the last decade has seen church architecture frequently return as a signifier of spiritual values rooted in contemporary circumstances.

The recently-completed St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Virgin located in North York, Ontario, is a striking example. Designed by Toronto-based Larkin Architects for the ecology-minded Catholic Passionist congregation, the resolutely-Modernist church is Canada's first LEED Gold certified worship space. At the same time, it also gives expression to a progressive liturgy based on an inseparable cosmic oneness of human life with all components of the natural world.

Of course, the best religious architecture has always been rooted in *genius loci*, in a profound expression of a sense of place closely attached to the local environment. As theorists Vincent Scully and Christian Norberg Schütz have postulated, the porous Greek temple had its origin in the benign classical landscape and temperate climate of the Mediterranean, the intricately carved Temple of Angkor Wat in the tangled jungles of Southeast Asia, and the divine light of the French Gothic cathedral in the unique light of the compagne. More recently, Finnish churches frequently seek a challenging but non-confrontational dialectic between the interior space of man and a romantic landscape still seemingly the habitat of traditional Nordic pagan gods.

The connection between spirituality and the environment underlying the Passionist's religious principles, however, is more intricate and cosmic in scope. It is derived from the "eco-theology" of Father Thomas Berry, which maintains that we "must work towards establishing a mutually-enhancing, human-earth relationship" if we are to heal our damaged relationship with Earth. The church is closely connected through its founder, the Rev. Stephen Dunn, to the Elliot Allen Institute for Theology and Ecology (EAITE), which offers a graduate certificate in Theology and Ecology at the Faculty of Theology of the University of St. Michael's College (University of Toronto). Its mandate, states the Institute's web page, is to explore scripture, tradition and contemporary scholarship to inform a theological response to ecological challenges while simultaneously seeking new liturgical expressions for exploring "creation spirituality."

### **A Sacred Responsibility**

The new \$10.5 million, 750-seat church replaces the original St. Gabriel's built in 1953 which had become both prohibitively expensive to maintain and a theological anathema to the group's deep doctrinal commitment to ecological sustainability. "While reducing energy costs was one of the reasons for building a 'green' church," current pastor Fr. Paul Cusack states, "our primary motivation was to establish a link between the sacredness of the gathered community of Faith and the sacredness of the Earth." The parish found the ideal ally in design principal Roberto Chiotti of Toronto-based Larkin Architect Limited, who has a Master of Theology, a certificate in Theology and Ecology, and has written and lectured extensively on Berry's eco-theology writings and how they can provide guidance to the practice of architecture. For example, he has written, "God has a covenantal relationship with not only humankind, but with all living creatures, and the earth. Our notions of 'dominion over' must give way to 'responsible stewardship' encouraging us to let go of our exploitive ways."

The form of the church is a simple stucco box wrapped on the east and north sides by a lower, L-shaped form. The eastern component forms St. Gabriel's narthex, a large free span "porch" that doubles as a parish hall. Entered across a generous piazza, the narthex's deeply recessed arcade (a Modernist re-interpretation of the Basilica of Sts. John and Paul at the Passionist's Rome headquarters) is clad in Manitoba Tyndall stone, not incidentally marked by ancient fossils of Canada's geological history.

Simplicity and a column-like treatment of the east elevation give the complex a quiet classicism. But the longer southern elevation presents a floor-to-ceiling glass wall canted inward toward the base and sheltered by a massive cantilevered canopy. At a practical level, this produces passive solar heating in winter and is supported by the thermal mass of exposed concrete walls. Equally important, the transparent wall eschews an other-worldly experience for the extension of the "sacred space of the worship area into the sacred space of the world beyond," says Chiotti.

The view outside is of a park landscaped to recall pre-settlement indigenous ecosystems including beech trees, black spruce and columnar oaks. This remarkable landscape is irrigated by rain water collected from the church's roof and sits atop an underground parking garage. It is also marked by eight "stations of our cosmic earth." Based on stained glass windows in the chapel at the Passionist's Holy Cross Centre for Ecology and Spirituality in Port Burwell, Ontario, they symbolize key moments of the universe and "the pilgrim journey of humankind within that story."

Pews in the nave, recycled from the original church, are arranged antiphonally with the facing rows "embracing a sacred north-south axis," or void that links the garden to a north wall of the nave. The latter is a translucent screen of etched glass panels depicting images of the Passion salvaged from the original church and separating the larger nave from a smaller chapel. Aligned along the sacred void are St. Gabriel's original marble font, ambo, and altar.

The architects have floated the ceiling above the walls with clerestory windows, as well as using an almost continuous perimeter skylight of stained glass. Streaks of richly coloured light, further fractured by wall-mounted dichroic-coated reflectors, wash rainbows down across the walls of exposed concrete. The colours shift from bright yellows in the south to deep azure blues toward the reflective chapel. In other words, Chiotti has written, through both time and seasonal changes "the cosmos shapes the liturgical environment and participates in the ritual action of the liturgy."

Equally symbolic but also practical is the north wall of the narthex. As parishioners ascend from the garage they do so under a sky-lit, "living wall" whose purifying plants are irrigated by recycled water. The plants' root enzymes process volatile organic compounds and other atmospheric pollutants while the water ensures natural humidification during winter. "Parishioners are reminded," says Chiotti, "of their baptismal covenant by the sound of its purifying waters. They are also reminded of how the rainforests serve a crucial role in earth's climate." A large scupper at the other end of the narthex roof allows rainwater to flow into a constructed wetland. At a more mundane level, the sacredness of water is celebrated through high-efficiency plumbing fixtures.

Other green features include top-level insulation values, high-efficiency mechanical systems matched with heat recovery, tremendous natural ventilation and day lighting, as well as room occupancy and daylight sensors. Finishes were minimized and restricted to low or zero VOC, construction waste was diverted to recycling opportunities (for example, recycling steel and using slag in the concrete), carpets included beet and corn stalk fibres and all millwork was formaldehyde-free wheat strawboard.

St Gabriel's is an intricate weaving of the practical with doctrine to engender a unique spiritual space, a very literal example of practising what you preach.