



NATASHA PASHAK

SACRED SPACE

Somewhere between Heaven and Earth, Alberta, lies a true architecture of faith.

By Arran Timms

Architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton uses the term “critical regionalism” to refer to contemporary architecture that aspires to synthesize, abstractly, the history and geography of a given place. Alberta’s better architects attempt to inform their work with these notions, inspired for example by the province’s chinook winds or expansive sky. A local architecture was born of practical concerns and took shape, for example, in the traditional prairie farmstead. Plain but functional buildings have defined the local built vernacular since. For instance, the fast-disappearing grain elevator is a regional icon. More recently, the giant wind-turbine facilities that “farm” electricity in southern Alberta have a form uniquely appropriate to their setting.

But Alberta’s religious architectures do not fit the prairie archetype. Each of Alberta’s religious communities, be they Ukrainian Orthodox, Irish Catholic, Islamic or otherwise, has generally built

religious structures here that reproduce traditional architectural forms from somewhere else. This has been true throughout the history of Alberta. When every homesteader’s farmhouse was fundamentally similar, across cultures their religious structures were not.

This raises basic questions regarding the nature of sacred space. What is it about sacred space, when imported from elsewhere, that makes it more or less immune to the local geographical and cultural forces that can shape a profane architecture so directly? Or to put it another way, what is it about those spaces and their associated iconography that lives so centrally in the imagination of the people who worship there, irrespective of other cultural factors? To those questions an architectural historian and critic like Frampton would add: What, then, constitutes an authentic religious architecture of Alberta? Which of this province’s sacred structures will history not forget?



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JIM DOW

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: St. Joachim's Catholic Church in Edmonton; Alberta's first church, c1920's, built by Father Lacombe; the Mormon temple in Cardston; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at the Historic Village outside Vegreville; The Beth Israel Synagogue in the west end of Edmonton designed by Manasc Isaac Architects and completed in 2000.

St. Joachim's in Edmonton was the region's first Roman Catholic parish church and one of the first religious structures in the province. Built in 1859 at Fort Edmonton, where it served the francophone settlers who had followed the fur trade into Alberta, it stands today on 110th Street in an incarnation that dates back to 1899. Whether or not it looks anything like a soaring, light-filled, 13th-century French Gothic cathedral, it is still unmistakably a Roman Catholic church, with typical architectural characteristics that can be traced back much further than the arrival of French-speaking Catholic missionaries to Alberta in the 1840s. It looks like a Catholic church might look anywhere in the Western world, being composed of a nave and a transept that form the sacred cross in plan. Perhaps this is why Michel, the church caretaker, told me it is so popular for local wedding ceremonies—that familiarity is comforting.

Similarly, the Ukrainian immigrants who settled east of Edmonton in Lamont County towards the end of the 19th century—and eventually in modern-day Vegreville—maintained the image of the Orthodox church from their homeland, as evidenced by the numerous structures that can still be found spread across the towns, villages and country roads of the entire municipal-

ality of these symbols both ensures their authority and enables their easy replication without regard for the other qualities of space they require or permit.

There are exceptions to the “import” phenomenon. The simple “box and steeple” Roman Catholic churches that used to dot small-town Alberta like so many decorated prairie barns are certainly part of the local built vernacular. Mundare's Our Lady of Perpetual Help, with its cemetery full of Polish immigrants, easily belies the theory that religious architecture in Alberta is strictly imported. The church is exceedingly unadorned, and were it not for its straightforward steeple, I would have had problems distinguishing it from a small house. Since it is far too tiny to contain a nave and transept and does not display much of the typical liturgical decoration, Our Lady of Perpetual Help comes closer to the prairie built archetype.

IN THE YEARS SINCE ST. JOACHIM AND OUR LADY OF Perpetual Help were built, the religious architecture of Alberta has become increasingly diverse. Some recent structures appear alien to the naked prairie landscape. The famous Mormon temple at Cardston is a perfect example. Its fortress-like masonry silhouette is exceedingly conspicuous in the big sky country of southern Alberta.

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ity. The Ukrainian pioneers' church-building boom left a legacy of Byzantine-styled buildings—primarily defined by their central domes, which symbolize heaven lowered toward the earth. Sadly, the parish churches of Vegreville itself have been replaced by highly forgettable contemporary buildings—some clad with brick veneer or vinyl siding. This seems to undermine the very significance of this land—the birthplace of the oldest and largest agricultural settlement of Ukrainians in Canada.

For those without the time or inclination to otherwise discover the historic religious structures on the Lamont County Self-Guided Church Tour, a memory of what these buildings used to be stands on the grounds of the Ukrainian Historic Village on the Yellowhead Highway outside Vegreville. A simulated Orthodox church there unfortunately reduces what was an important part of the cultural legacy of the province to a tourist experience.

The religious meaning in these churches' architecture lives in their respective icons. The Latin-cross plan and standard liturgical art of the Roman Catholic church built at St. Joachim do not express the national peculiarities of a people, but rather a spiritual belief system. And the Orthodox dome is as universal as Orthodoxy itself, not unique to an ethnic group or political state. The univer-

Constructed of a dense marble skin on a steel substructure, with only severe slit windows to break up its mass, the temple's form speaks of a religious faith that considers itself under siege—or did, upon the temple's completion in 1923. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, founded in the 1820s in New York State by pioneer Joseph Smith, faced repeated persecution and dislocation.)

Neither could the architecture of the immense Sikh temple currently being assembled on the outskirts of Edmonton be called indigenous. Lovingly constructed by volunteer hands from around the globe, the temple seems terminally incomplete, but looms enormously from the fields of oilseed and cereal crop that envelop its foundation. Despite its ominous size and lavish decoration, everything about this building speaks of patience and earth-bound devotion. Upon entering the temple, I was instructed by a sign to remove my shoes. The carefully laid tile mosaic cooled my freshly exposed toes. An old man, one of the many Sikhs who typically animate the temple, shuffled his feet rhythmically along the floor. The kitchen and dining hall are accessed straight through the entry vestibule. They occupy almost the entire ground floor, below the main worship space. The day I visited was a workday rather than a worship day, and a strong waft of



Located on the outskirts of Edmonton is Alberta's first and only Nanaksar Gurdwara Gursikh temple, part of a global Gursikh network.

curry emanated from this part of the building. There were many hungry mouths to feed among the various labourers on site. Some of these had journeyed from Asia and the U.K. to participate in the creation of Alberta's first and only true Nanaksar Gurdwara Gursikh temple, part of a Gursikh network that stretches around the globe. Colourfully adorned women occupied the kitchen, but most of the volunteers were cultivating the fields behind the temple, waiting to be called for lunch. To cut costs, much of the building has been constructed with salvaged materials such as the ceramic tile and huge laminated beams recycled from the Griesbach School at CFB Edmonton.

When Edmonton's Sikh community gathers here on the weekend for religious observance, the service too is a patient, grounded affair. The sacred text is more verse than prose and is read continuously while the worshippers sit directly on the floor. The hall itself is quite simple, very tall and open to a mezzanine that runs the upstairs perimeter. Light from strip windows behind the shallow

mezzanine filters down to the hall floor, which is covered with cushioned mats. No chairs are permitted inside the prayer hall. The temple's exterior form shares some likeness with an Orthodox church in that its towers end in bulbous domes, one of which houses the sacred text. However, the Gursikh temple displays considerably more decorative detail than any other religious architecture I visited—all completed by hand. "It is beautiful because it was built with love," say the volunteers, and I agree.

The Aga Khan Foundation is concerned with love of a related sort. It is a non-denominational, non-partisan international development agency of the Ismaili Muslim community that primarily benefits health and education in rural Asia and East Africa. It also builds mosques around the world. The foundation built Calgary's Jamatkhana mosque and Ismaili Centre atop a prominent crest overlooking the Deerfoot Trail expressway. Although the mosque is a mysterious addition to the industrial and commercial complexes that line the highway, it is not as altogether foreign to its context as Alberta's Sikh or



Calgary's Jamatkhana mosque and Ismaili Centre sits atop a prominent crest overlooking the Deerfoot Trail expressway.

Mormon temples. An interesting mix of Eastern and Western building forms, it could be confused with a big-city postmodern edifice by Robert Venturi, but at the same time, displays the strong organizing geometry of traditional arabesque architecture. The stepped octagonal roofline of the Jamatkhana prayer hall creates a dramatic skyline viewed from the highway, reminiscent of classic Islamic minarets. The tall, slender towers that flanked a mosque's sacred hall were originally dominated by polygonal and circular shafts. Rather than a dome or conical roof, however, the Calgary mosque is crowned with diamond-shaped windows facing west to the Rockies and the slowly fading afternoon light that illuminates the finely decorated brick façade. For those who frequent the high-speed thoroughway north to Calgary's busy international airport, the mosque's unique profile brings a moment of thoughtful repose.

Some additions to Alberta's cornucopia of religious structures are not new, but second-hand. In Calgary, a Buddhist monastery has replaced what was, for a while,

the Mountain Equipment Co-op store and originally a small, purpose-built office building for an oilfield services company. Among other cosmetic changes, two large lion figures grew up on either side of its entry stair—a transformation I witnessed daily from the windows of the light rail transit train. The shift from secular to sacred is not an entirely unusual occurrence. The Chinese evangelical Christian church on a residential-commercial strip of 20th Avenue in northwest Calgary appears to have once been a residential bungalow. Perhaps that pioneering practicality is not so far from the minds of today's church builders after all.

WHAT, THEN, IS A SIGNIFICANT RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE of Alberta? If it can't be found in an historical theme park off the Trans-Canada Highway heading east to Vegreville, perhaps it's hiding behind the extraordinarily stoic facade of Cardston's Mormon temple, erected by Yankee polygamists fleeing religious persecution one year before the first oil strike in Turner Valley. Was it recently reborn as a



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: the bold organic outline of St. Mary's Cathedral in Red Deer; the exterior view of the three confessionals; the circular interior with curving walls and sweeping ceiling pierced by two deep round fissures; skylights flood the altar and the pulpit with natural light.

Buddhist monastery in a former Mountain Equipment Co-op store on the Bow River at the western perimeter of downtown Calgary? Or does it reside in a northwest Calgary neighbourhood in a squat bungalow, as a Chinese Evangelical church proclaiming to passing commuters that “God is Love”?

POSSIBLY THE MOST AUTHENTIC, MOST SIGNIFICANT religious architecture of Alberta may turn out not to come from immigrant culture at all. Although few “significant” works of religious architecture may exist in this province, Douglas Cardinal’s St. Mary’s church in Red Deer is an obvious exception. It has been strikingly photographed and consistently lauded since its completion in 1968.

In fact, Cardinal’s church is now required study in any introductory survey of modern architecture in Canada. As a self-assured first-year student, I once wrote an historical critique of this building without ever having stepped through its doors. When I did visit St. Mary’s for the first time last fall, the words I had written dissolved into meaninglessness. Everyone who knows of Cardinal’s church is aware of its unusual design—literally, a church in the round. The casual observer may remark upon its

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atypically sculptural exterior. For the fortunate visitor or worshipper who sits, perfectly still, in its pews, however, the calmness of the space is extraordinary. The church’s curvaceous and sweeping roof seems to caress its congregation, evoking a visceral, womb-like feeling. I was overwhelmed by a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Cardinal’s church is nonetheless grand. While contemplative and serene, it lacks neither majesty nor magic. Two deep, round fissures that appear to tunnel straight into the heavens puncture the building’s roof. These ingenious skylights focus the cloudless prairie sky onto the altar and pulpit below. The effect, with all interior artificial lights turned off, is unquestionably divine. I imagine that to see St. Mary’s clergy under these skylights might be akin to watching the light-drenched figures in one of Carravaggio’s chiaroscuro masterpieces come to life.

Yet Cardinal seems also to have achieved a perfect balance between drama and simplicity. Underneath the fluid roofscape is a space remarkable for its straightforward geometry. St. Mary’s has no nave or transept; instead, it is semi-circular. The aisles radiate directly from the altar. The main floor also slopes toward this focal point, allowing an unobstructed view of the altar and the entire hall. The significance of this plan goes beyond the symbolic: it facilitates congregation, not segregation. It engenders “meeting” and encourages a closer sharing of faith.

The adjacent circular baptistry, separated from the main hall by the vestibule, is spacious and brightly lit through generous glazing that faces both the interior and exterior of the church. Upon entering and leaving the church, the congregation take the blessing of holy water as in every Catholic worship, and to my eye the act of entering St. Mary’s appears as much about transparent social exchange as it is a reminder of baptismal commitment.

Outside, you can’t ignore the bold, organic outline of St. Mary’s against Red Deer’s vacant suburban landscape. But by no means is this building “foreign” to the prairie. The church’s circular plan is clearly manifest in the graceful arc of its brick-clad façade. The northern end of the arc terminates in a sculptural bell tower beside the church’s entry. On the opposite end of that arc are three smaller, complementary towers—three of nine confessional cubicles within the church. The penitents’ cubicles are only visible from the interior, while these three priests’ cubicles stand out as discrete entities on what is otherwise a smooth and restrained elevation. There is no noticeable exterior decoration except for the subtle texture of the church’s facing, in which the bricks, according to Cardinal’s website, were purposely laid “slightly askew to

impart a rough-hewn monastic look to the building” (to say nothing of the understated but beautiful material texture this brick imparts to the church—and its consequent play of light).

St. Mary’s is technically novel too, with its complex catenary post-tensioned reinforced concrete shell and amorphous composition that far and away predates Frank Gehry’s contemporary, titanium-clad sculptural musings at Bilbao or Seattle (or more locally, the Calgary Saddledome roof). Despite the controversy surrounding an unauthorized and sizeable addition to St. Mary’s in 1995, Cardinal’s design remains unparalleled.

Natives came before the fur traders, the missionaries, the homesteaders and the oilmen. The indigenous people’s relationship to the local landscape is inherent to their spiritual belief and to their understanding of “place” on a profound level. The prehistoric petroglyphs found around the province are evidence of the strong connection Natives felt, and continue to feel, with their sacred land. No small irony, then, that Douglas Cardinal, a Métis raised in the now-vilified residential school system, has built what may well be the most beautiful church in Alberta.

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Driftpile School, Drift Pile First Nation Reserve, Driftpile

Distinguished Alberta Architecture



Big Secret Theatre Expansion, Calgary



House on a Prairie, Springbank



Arbour Pow-Wow Ground Ermineskin Cultural Park, Hobbema



The Francis Winspear Centre for Music, Edmonton



The Rosza Centre, Calgary

Award Winning Architects

2000 Prairie Design Awards

Award of Excellence

Sturgess Architecture, Calgary for *House on a Prairie*, Springbank

Award of Merit

Carruthers & Associates Architects Inc., Calgary for *Burgess Shale Earth Sciences Learning Centre*, Field, BC

Award of Merit

Culham Pedersen Valentine Architecture Engineering Space Planning and Interior Design, Calgary for *TransAlta Corporation Customer Care Centre*, Calgary

Award of Merit

Down + Livesey Architects, Calgary for *2112 Westmount Road*, Calgary

Award of Merit

Jerilyn Wright & Associates Interior Design Consultants Ltd., Calgary for *The Dominion Company*, Calgary

Award of Merit

Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd., Edmonton for *Bushe River Gas Station/Pharmacy/Grocery*, Bushe River

Award of Merit

Stantec Architecture Ltd., Edmonton for *Boys and Girls Club of Edmonton*

Award of Excellence for Best Presentation
Sturgess Architecture, Calgary for the *Entry Series for House on a Prairie, House on a Lake, House on a Ranch, Bow Valley Centre Redevelopment Plan*, Calgary

Award of Merit for Exhibit Design

Marc Boutin Architect, Calgary for *Calgary Modern 1947-67*, Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary

1998 Alberta Association of Architects Design Awards

Award of Excellence

The Cohos Evamy Partners Architecture Engineering Interior Design, Edmonton/Calgary for *The Francis Winspear Centre for Music*, Edmonton

Award of Excellence

Culham Pedersen Valentine Architecture, Calgary for *The Rosza Centre*, U of C, Calgary

Award of Excellence

Ingrid Adamcik - Student Project, for *School of Dance*

Award of Merit

Terry Frost Architect, Edmonton for the *Terry Frost Residence*

Award of Merit

Stantec Architecture Ltd. (previously Barry Johns Architects Ltd.), Edmonton for *Nilex Inc.*, Edmonton

Award of Merit

Brian Oakley, City of Edmonton Land and Buildings for *Library Parkade Way Finding*, Edmonton

1996 Alberta Association of Architects Design Awards

Award of Excellence

LeBlond Partnership Architects Planners, Calgary for *Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretative Centre*, West of Fort McLeod

Award of Excellence

Manasc Isaac Architects Ltd., Edmonton for *Driftpile School*, Driftpile First Nation Reserve, Driftpile

Award of Excellence

Mark W. Chambers Architect Ltd., Calgary for *Secret Theatre Expansion*, Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts, Calgary

Award of Merit

Francis Ng Architect Ltd., Edmonton for *Arbour Pow-Wow Ground Ermineskin Cultural Park*, Hobbema

Award of Merit

Simpson Roberts Architecture Interior Design Inc., Calgary for *Doll Block Façade Restoration, Stephen Avenue Mall*, Calgary

Award of Merit

Simpson Roberts Architecture Interior Design Inc., Calgary for *Western Headworks Canal*, Calgary to Chestermere

Award of Merit

The Cohos Evamy Partners Architecture Engineering Interior Design, Edmonton/Calgary for *Sally Borden Building*, Banff

Award of Merit

The Cohos Evamy Partners Architecture Engineering Interior Design, Edmonton/Calgary for *Panini A Vini*, Edmonton

Award of Merit

Sturgess Architecture, Calgary for *Connaught Gardens*, Calgary

Award of Merit

David Ferguson - Student Project, for *Kensington Gate Artists' Studio Apartments and Gallery*