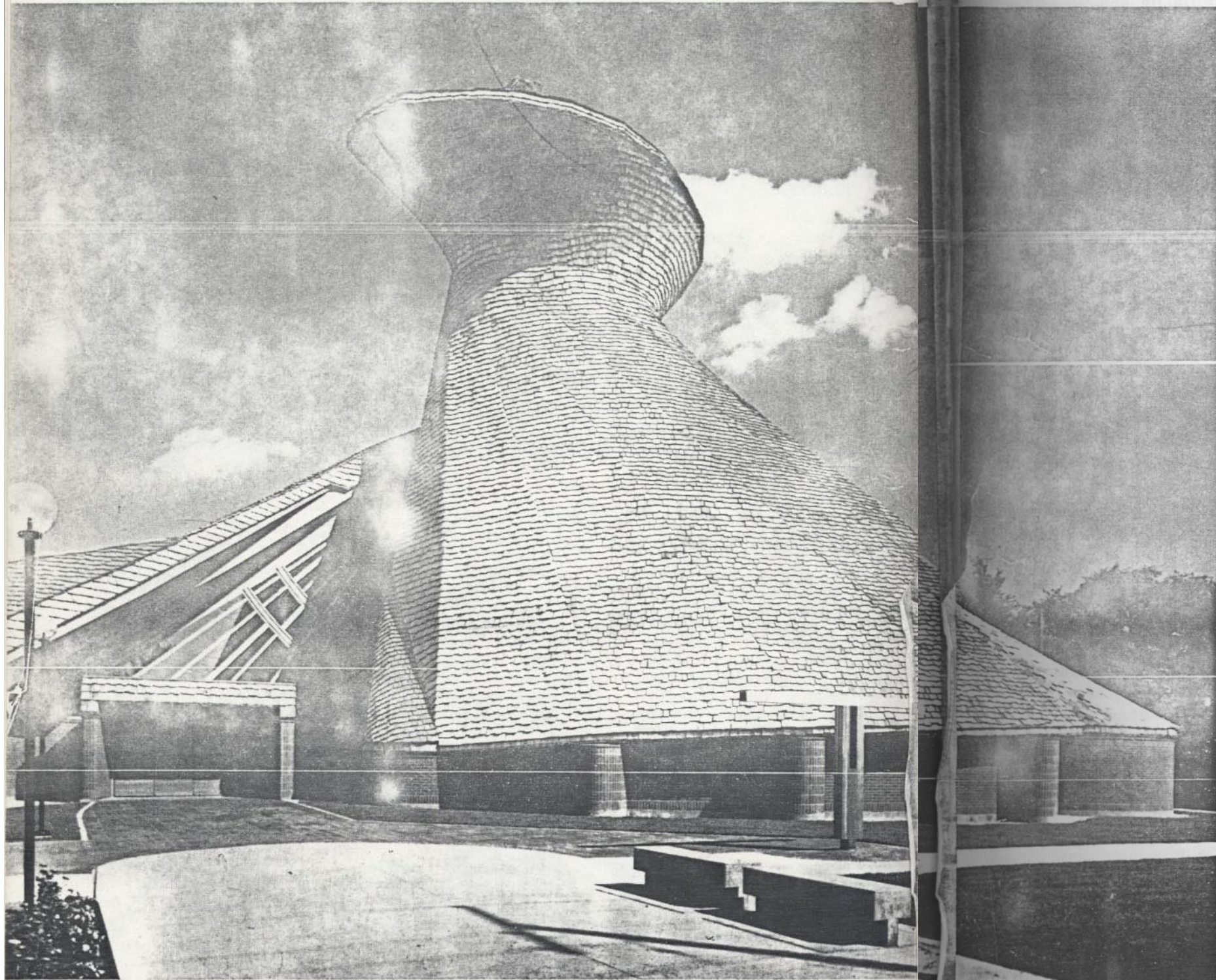


PRECIOUS BLOOD CHURCH



Modern architecture's birth was fundamentally rational; based on logic and economy, its elements first evolved for worldly purposes. Thus a problem is immediately posed when the design of a religious building has to reflect fervour and emotion, rather than the mind and the intellect.

The question of religious expression in our own time is rendered more difficult by the comparative lack of religious fervour. The medieval cathedral held the allegiance of farmer and tradesman, learned and sophisticated, but today religion no longer holds the central position that it held several hundred years ago. Today's office towers, shopping centers and stadiums are mundane, but they strongly affect the character of our towns and cities, at the expense of the ecclesiastical building which in almost every previous phase of architectural history had, along with the occasional palace, commanded the greatest degree of technical ingenuity and sincere creative effort, as well as prime location.

Many functions assumed by today's church are no longer tied to a church building but are found in other aspects of daily life, and thus cannot be expressed in a single edifice or even at all in building materials. For such reasons, we in the twentieth century cannot expect to design, build and use houses of worship as full a reflection of our minds and spirits as were the cathedrals of Chartres and Canterbury of our forefathers.

Thus architects, traditionally afforded their greatest opportunities by a cathedral, now find that their present outlook and background generally render them unfit for today's equivalent. At a very early stage in the church program, analysis has to be forsaken; symbolism must be invoked, or alternatively reliance placed on intuition. Nonetheless it is not simply a matter of finding the means to stimulate an emotional response in the spectator, since without a fundamental message to communicate, architectural ingenuity merely becomes arbitrary and capricious. (Many submissions to major competitions held in the U.K. several years ago for Coventry and Liverpool Cathedrals were vulgar stunts, banal or historically derivative.)

To compound this situation, strong differences of opinion

Architect: Etienne Gaboury. Associate architect: Denis Lussier. Contractor: Bockstael Construction. The critique was written by Professor Jonas Lehrman.

often exist among even those who commission the architect and are of the same denomination. For example, the relative importance of ceremonial and sermon (with subsequent varied emphasis on altar and pulpit) is often disputed.

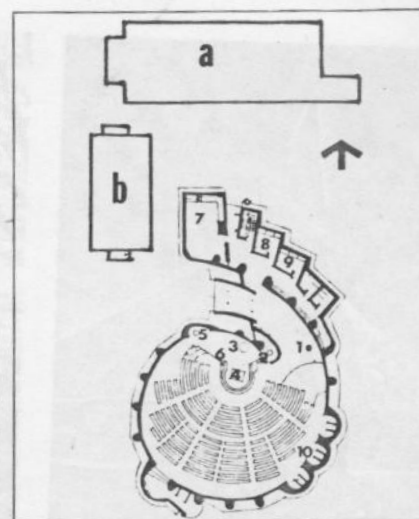
It may be argued that a fundamental principle upon which today's architecture rests is that of function. In itself (and even applied to religious buildings) this is not new. The synagogue used to be only a communal centre and place of instruction, and the Friends' Meeting house is still little more than its name implies. Though minor requirements vary between denominations, it could be stated that a function of the religious building is to convert its occupants into worshippers, and to provide an atmosphere conducive to receiving the religious message. Unfortunately, this particular function cannot be achieved in a purely rational manner. Many of today's buildings, their designs based on the simple structural function of shelter, go far in achieving a highly satisfactory quality, but by itself this is inadequate. The use of movable seats and altar to suit the position of the sun and purpose of meeting, the placing of windows primarily with regard to particular external views (or the sky!), and the use of a vertical feature solely to contain mechanical equipment and observation room, though admirable ideas in themselves, are obviously insufficient. As Geoffrey Scott pointed out in *The Architecture of Humanism*, "the Art of Architecture studies not structure in itself, but the effect of structure on the human spirit". Or to adapt Osbert Lancaster's wise remark, a machine for praying in presupposes a barrenness of spirit to which we have not yet quite attained.

Enduring criteria, common to every period of architecture, have been plan, mass and surface. Often these have been enhanced by dramatic exaggeration and adornment of the structure, and occasionally by decorative splendour; or with particular reference to religious building, by such means as the manipulation of volume and spaces, axes, heavy beams on massive columns, delicate vaults on slender shafts, lighting, and stained glass, which led to a desirable spiritual quality.

But as we have pointed out, the esoteric and detached use of domes, spires, aedicules and other assorted paraphernalia, though reminiscent, are insufficient. Clearly, the inspiration to be derived through an ecclesiastical building will be lacking until the building itself, in addition to enclosing, allowing for and expressing its purpose, further *participates* (as does today's junior school), in the activities it shelters.

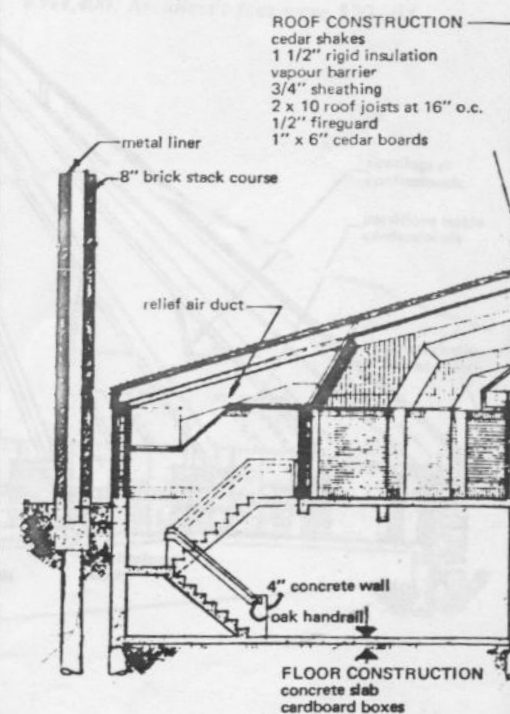
Since functionalism by itself is insufficient, the religious building should be designed in the *spirit* of the faith, even as part of the worship itself. It seems essential that the design of such a building should require of the architect his fullest convictions, in addition to his ability. As Albert Schweitzer once wrote in connection with music, 'every great work of art, like every great idea, needs an atmosphere of enthusiasm for the revelation of its perfect beauty'.

In the design of Winnipeg's Precious Blood Church, Etienne Gaboury certainly has this enthusiasm. His deep involvement in the meaning and symbolism of the Roman



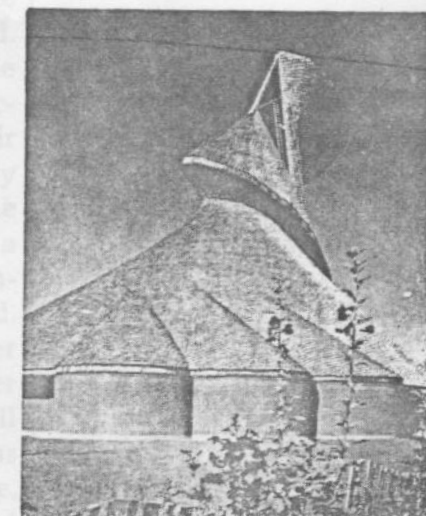
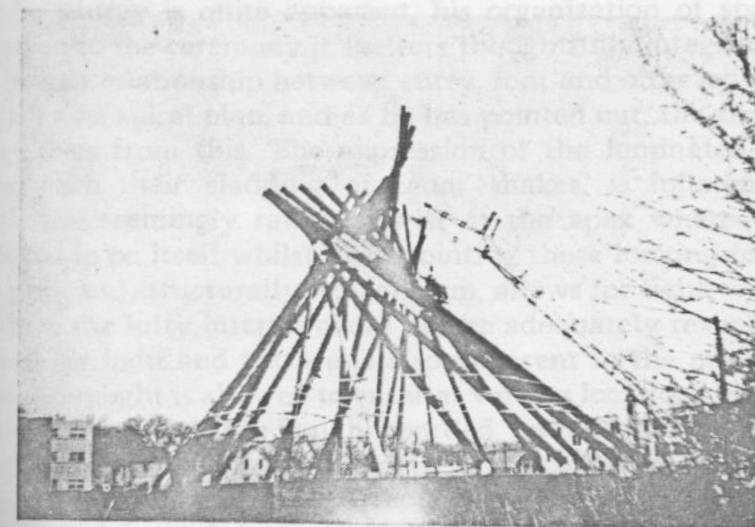
- a existing basement
- b existing rectory
- 1 holy water stoop
- 2 baptismal font
- 3 sedilia
- 4 altar
- 5 holy reserve
- 6 pulpit
- 7 sacristy
- 8 boys' sacristy
- 9 work sacristy
- 10 confessionals

A spiral structure emanating from a spiral plan. The 'molded basin' receives the all-wood superstructure, the brick walls and floors are used as the binding matrix. From the brick basin, an impressive swirling superstructure creating a space difficult to portray with even the best of photography.



- ROOF CONSTRUCTION
- cedar shakes
- 1 1/2" rigid insulation
- vapour barrier
- 3/4" sheathing
- 2 x 10 roof joists at 16" o.c.
- 1/2" fireguard
- 1" x 6" cedar boards

- FLOOR CONSTRUCTION
- concrete slab
- cardboard boxes



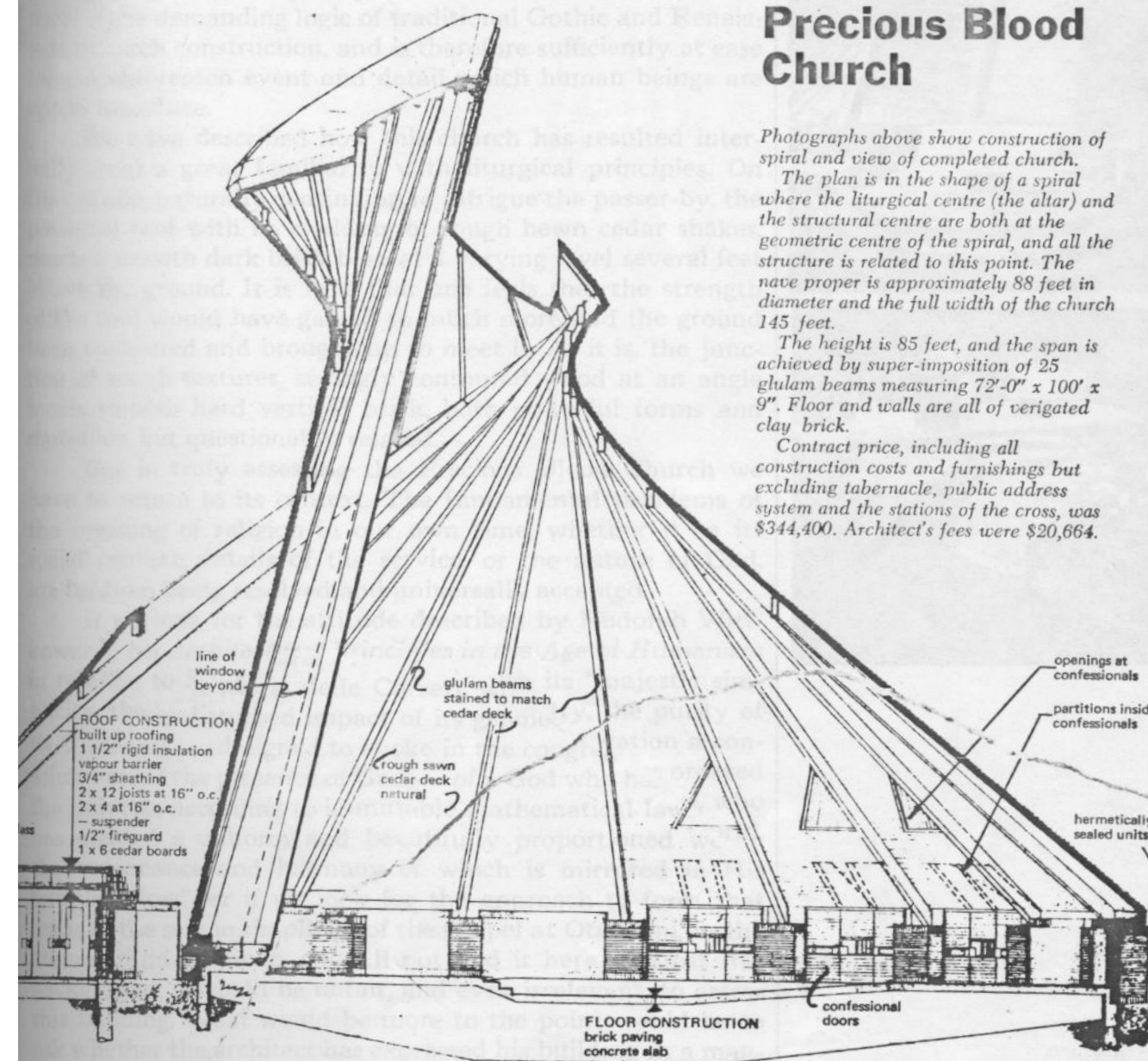
Precious Blood Church

Photographs above show construction of spiral and view of completed church.

The plan is in the shape of a spiral where the liturgical centre (the altar) and the structural centre are both at the geometric centre of the spiral, and all the structure is related to this point. The nave proper is approximately 88 feet in diameter and the full width of the church 145 feet.

The height is 85 feet, and the span is achieved by super-imposition of 25 glulam beams measuring 72'-0" x 100' x 9". Floor and walls are all of verigated clay brick.

Contract price, including all construction costs and furnishings but excluding tabernacle, public address system and the stations of the cross, was \$344,400. Architect's fees were \$20,664.



- ROOF CONSTRUCTION
- built up roofing
- 1 1/2" rigid insulation
- vapour barrier
- 3/4" sheathing
- 2 x 12 joists at 16" o.c.
- 2 x 4 at 16" o.c.
- suspender
- 1/2" fireguard
- 1 x 6 cedar boards

- FLOOR CONSTRUCTION
- brick paving
- concrete slab

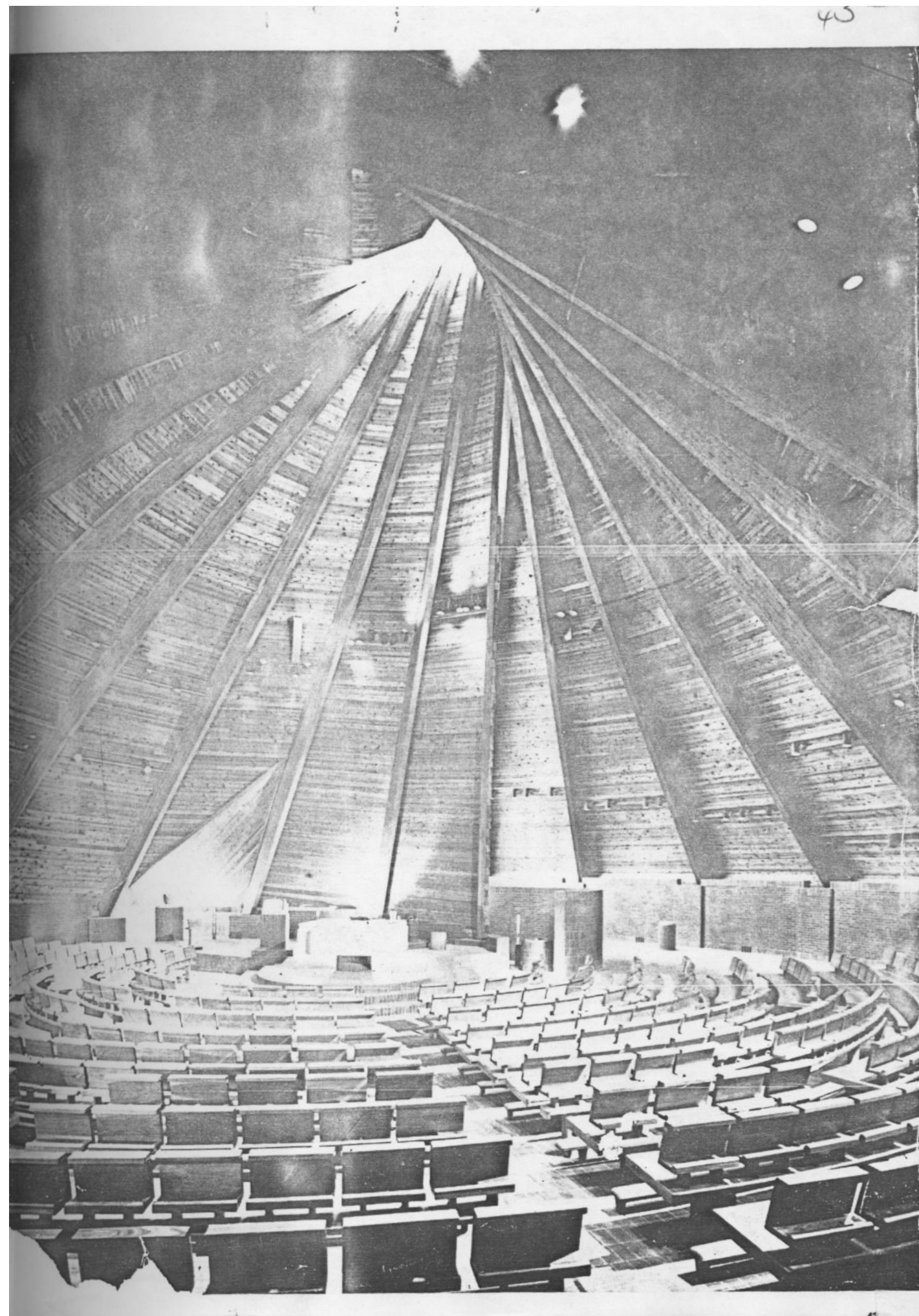
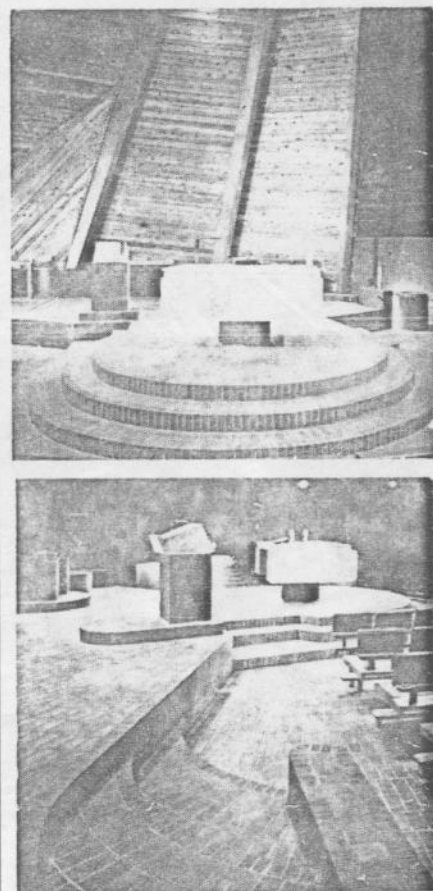
Catholic liturgy is quite apparent, his organization of space in relation to the ceremony it shelters thoughtfully integrated. The desired relationship between entry, font and altar led the architect to a spiral plan, and as he has pointed out, the structure evolves from this. The expression of the laminated fir beams, with their cladding of cedar shakes, is inherently logical; the seemingly random twist at the apex where the roof turns in on itself whilst disappointing those looking for a more pure and structurally logical form, allows for light, without which the lofty interior could not be adequately revealed. Concern for light and texture is also apparent in the manner in which daylight is allowed to enter at various locations under the eaves, revealing the rough boarded texture on the wall immediately above, which becomes progressively smooth as it reaches towards the apex. Although plan, space, structure, light, materials and texture are carefully considered and closely integrated, the quality of the interior fortunately stops short of the demanding logic of traditional Gothic and Renaissance church construction, and is therefore sufficiently at ease for the unforeseen event and detail which human beings are apt to introduce.

We have described how this church has resulted internally from a great familiarity with liturgical principles. On the outside, naturally continuing to intrigue the passer-by, the powerful roof with its cladding of rough hewn cedar shakes, meets a smooth dark brick base at a varying level several feet above the ground. It is here that one feels that the strength of the roof would have gained so much more had the ground been contoured and brought up to meet it. As it is, the junction of rough textures, strongly contoured wood at an angle meets smooth hard vertical brick, both powerful forms and materials, but questionably related.

But in truly assessing the Precious Blood Church we have to return to its context. The fundamental problems of the meaning of religion in our own time, whether it be its social context, details of the service, or the nature of God, are far from being resolved and universally accepted.

If we look for the attitude described by Rudolph Wittkower in his *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* in relation to S. Maria delle Carceri, with its "majestic simplicity, the undisturbed impact of its geometry, the purity of its whiteness... designed to evoke in the congregation a consciousness of the presence of God — of a God who has ordered the universe according to immutable mathematical laws, who has created a uniform and beautifully proportioned world, the consonance and harmony of which is mirrored in His temple below", or if we look for the approach to form that leads to the serene simplicity of the chapel at Otaniemi, or the crematorium at Gävle, we will not find it here. Against this background, it would be unfair, and even irrelevant, to assess this building. What would be more to the point would be to ask whether the architect has expressed his building in a manner that has meaning to the members of this particular Roman Catholic congregation and their clergy in St. Boniface, Manitoba. Yes, he has.

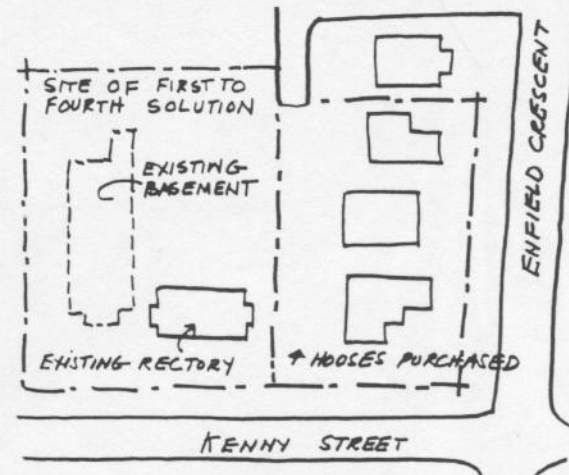
Jonas Lehrman



The lengthy search for the appropriate solution to the Precious Blood Church was complicated by two main factors: (1) The difficulty of the initial site and eventual recognition of the need to change it. (2) The changing mood of the church and its liturgy and the resulting conflict (or contradiction) in program requirements.

The initial program entailed the erection of an 800-place church over the existing basement and foundations. This basement had been constructed as the first stage of a two-stage church building program typical of the time. The basement was designed to receive a super-structure, but was by then much too small to satisfy the requirements of the expanded parish.

A rectory was also built on the south-west corner of the site, thereby blocking one-half of the site and dominating it by its sheer mass to the extent where the new church was a counterpart to the rectory. Immediately south of the existing site across a service lane



and at the corner of Kenny Street and Enfield Crescent were four old houses facing the crescent. After four tentative solutions on the restricted site, the clients saw the need to either purchase the four houses or relocate their parish corner.

Our first studies for the Precious Blood Church began in 1961 and the building was not erected until 1967. The studies therefore began before the Ecumenical Council and continued during the tumultuous period of change in theology as well as in basic liturgy. The whole concept of the church was undergoing at that time a considerable change, and in fact the very program change from the first sketches to the completed building reveals a fundamental change of concept of the church—from the monumental, formal and impersonal scale of 800 places to a more intimate, personal scale and concept of a church for 550 places. The paradox of it all (and in no way simplifying the problem) is that there was much reticence towards 'modern' architecture and considerable concern at the outset about ending up with a building that would not be endowed with the comforting traits of good traditional church architecture.

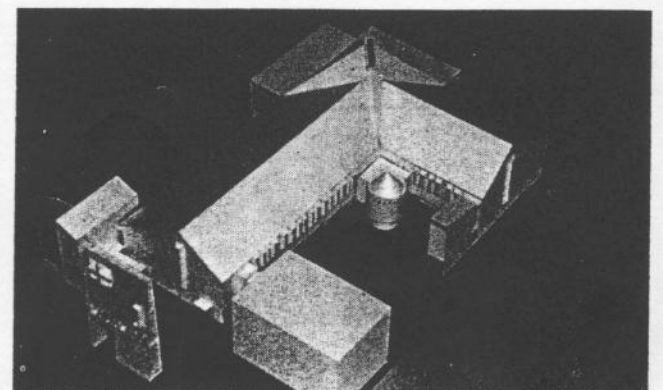
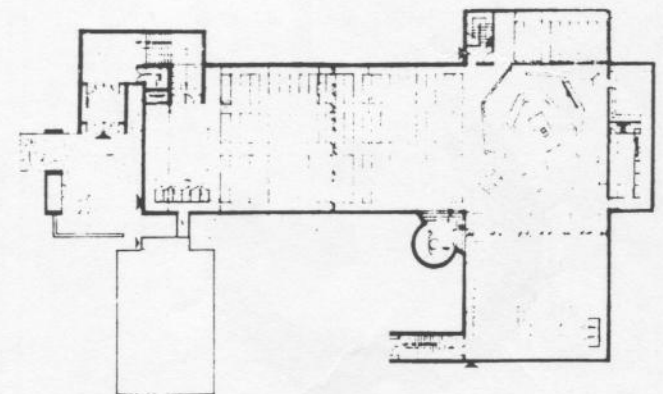
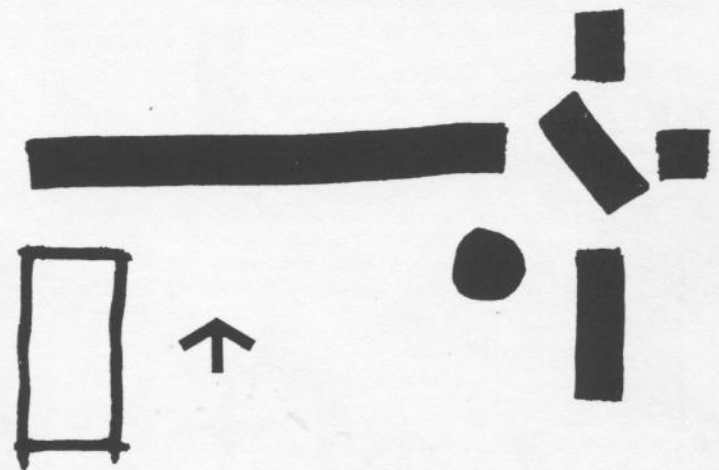
The very fact that we were in very unstable time (religiously speaking) and the fact that the site was so difficult at the initial stage permitted us to evolve the solution in close collaboration with the client. The search for the solution was really a series of trial sketches revealing various aspects of the problem, solving the problem only partially but thereby permitting the dialogue with the client and inviting him to join into the search. I believe it was very significant that the first considerations were primarily of technical and visual order while considerations at the last phase of development were basic concept, religious significance, liturgical order and the place of the church in the community. The search for the solution was therefore done in close collaboration with the client and rather than attempting to submit 'The Solution' for the first meeting and making sure that it was 'sold' so that we could proceed with working drawings, we rather reversed the procedure presenting sketches and expressed concern while presenting them that the problem had not yet been resolved.

Etienne Gaboury.

1 This first solution was based on an 800-seat church built over the existing basement foundation. These foundations rose 7 feet above the ground which gave us the first major problem. There was not enough space in front of the existing basement to allow for an enclosed and direct stairway to the second level. The entrance would therefore have to be indirect. Although inconsistent because we could not relate the spacial sequence to a liturgical one, a series of mood-oriented spaces were evolved, providing a dramatic transition from the profane to the sacred via the monumental and symbolical gateway. The exterior atrium, the dim-lit vertically polarized narthex which finally led to a horizontal nave at the confessional. The functional, the liturgical and the architectural were all somewhat strained in this entrance but at the bond that it established with the rectory made it almost worth while.

The L-shaped nave had an inherent difficulty in that it divided the congregation into two parts. However, in the light of the size of this church such a concept might have been valid.

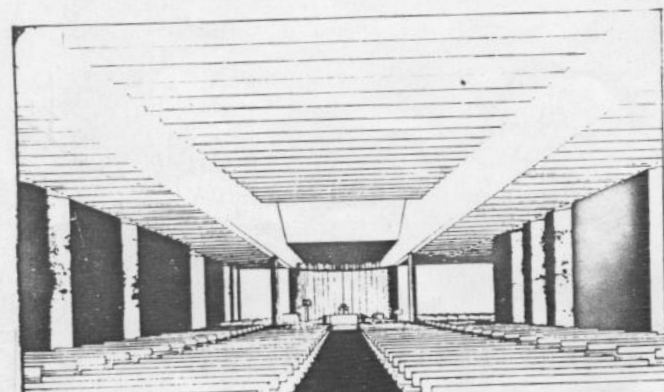
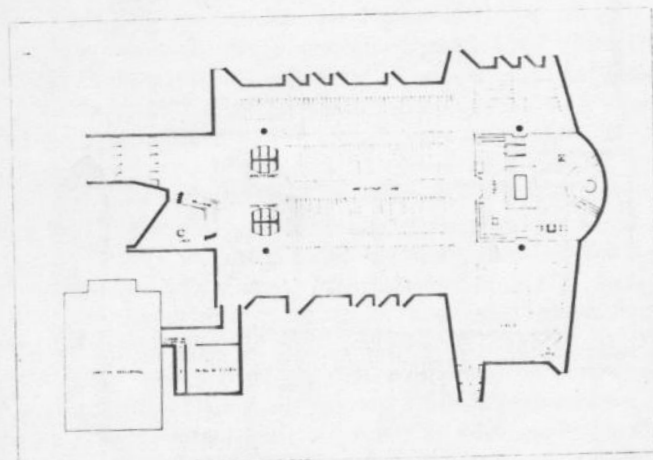
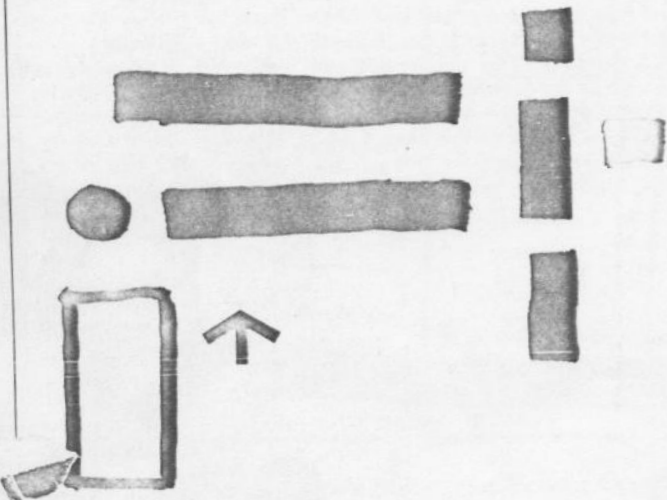
Although technical problems such as the height of the basement wall and the length and width of the main nave seriously weakened this solution, it is interesting to note how all the ingredients (our concerns) of the final solution were already present in this first study: (a) a dynamic plan with the altar as the centre and fulcrum of the composition (b) the amphitheatre-like seating of the congregation, suggested here but not resolved and (c) the baptismal font at the front of the church to permit a communal action between the altar (celebrant), the congregation and the baptistry. This solution did not resolve the fundamental problem of the dual role of the baptistry as a communal sacrament which should be placed at the front of the church for full participation and as a long standing and very valid symbol of the entry to the church which would require it to be at the entrance. This entire exercise and the five schemes that go with it was to a major extent an effort to resolve this basic problem in liturgical and architectural terms.



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2

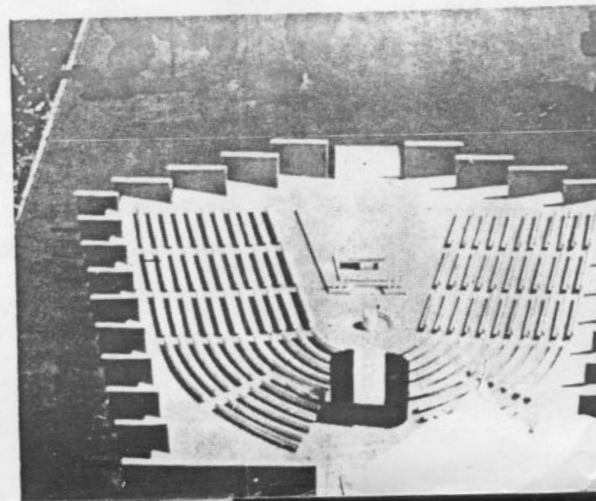
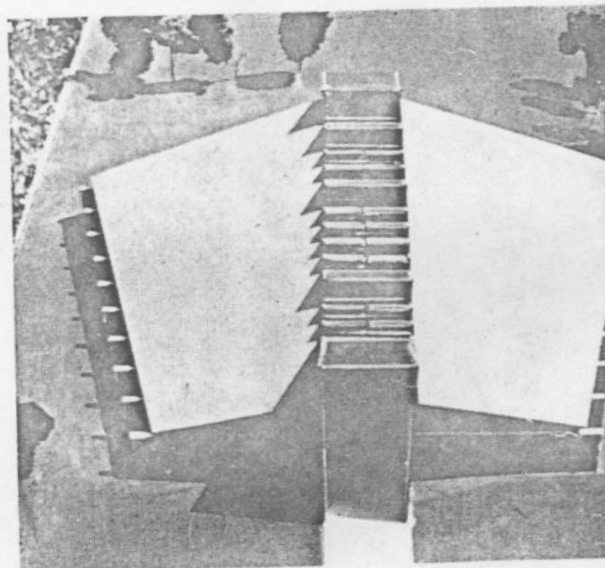
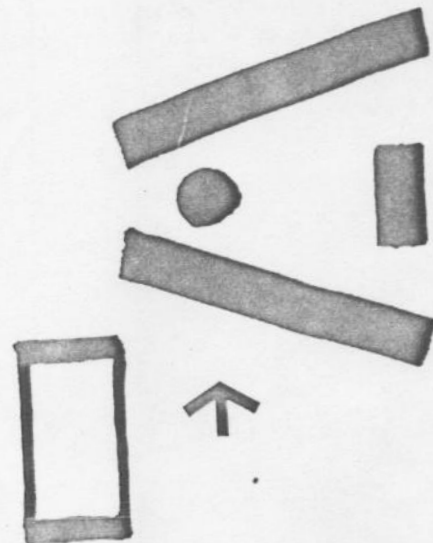
The principal reason for abandoning the first solution was the unacceptable height of the nave floor level. It also became apparent that the retention of the old basement was false economy when compared to the overall cost of the project.

The second solution was therefore a return to a standard solution at grade with a full basement. Except for the widening of the nave, all the spirit of the first solution was lost. This solution reflects the pressures to return to a traditional plan, and the struggle to relate a symmetrical solution to a highly asymmetrical site condition.



3

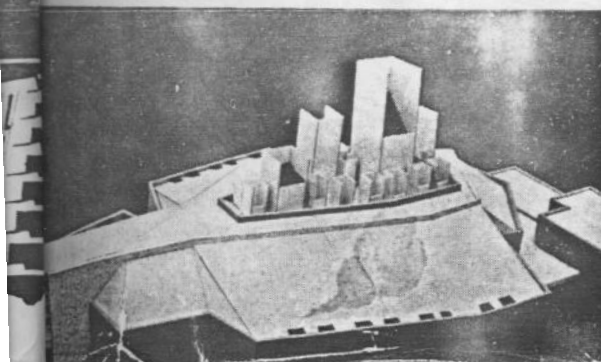
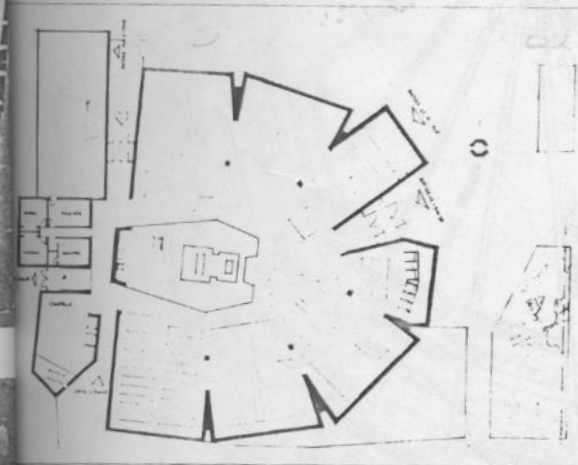
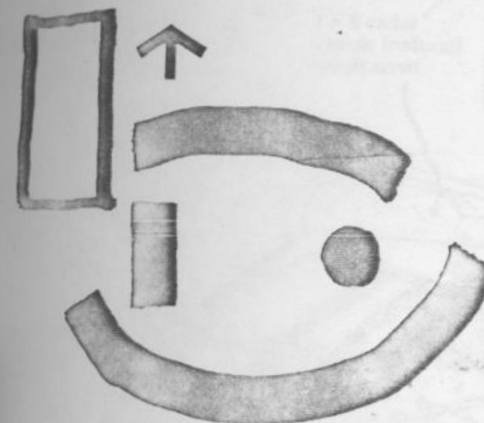
This plan is the first major break towards the solution of the problem in that it gathers the congregation around the altar and sets the sacramental functions in strong hierarchical order and in view. It is nevertheless an unworkable compromise because it does not acknowledge the site and divides the nave at the initial point of bond. In sense it destroys what it sets out to do.



4

This plan attempts to resolve the two basic problems of solution number 3. Realizing that the rectory became a serious impediment to the siting of the new building, especially in relationship to the entrance, mass and axis, we looked into the possibility of relocating the rectory. The cost of such an undertaking was obviously prohibitive and made the purchase of four homes seem more reasonable.

One can see that the symmetry was again abandoned and the entrance juggled to avoid the arbitrary division of the nave. This solution did not resolve this problem, but attempted to break down the space to give it a more human scale. The monumental concept is giving way to a more intimate approach. The capacity of the church has already reduced considerably in this second last scheme.



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5

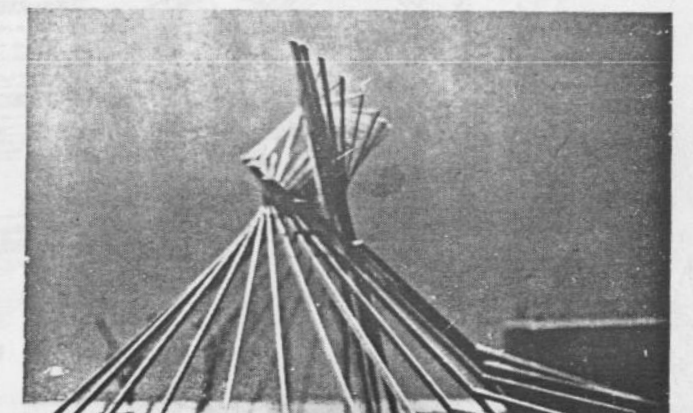
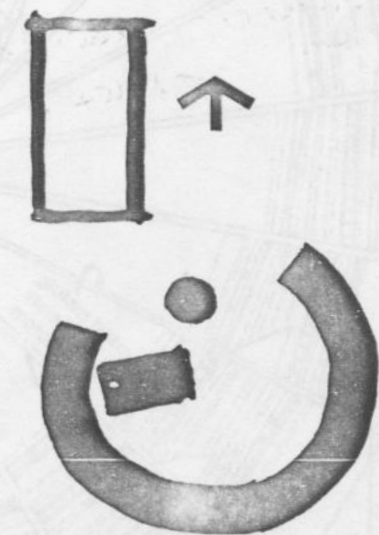
Considerable time lapsed between the fourth and final solution in negotiating the purchase of four residences on Enfield Crescent. At this stage the liturgical concepts and the architectural problems were also becoming much clearer. The new site gave considerably more freedom in the development of the solution.

The spiral plan was not arrived at by coincidence—previous projects had already accepted the spiral movement (See The Canadian Architect March, 1968) as the ideal resolution to the problem. There was however, considerable reluctance to attempt a real spiral solution since the structural and cost considerations seemed beyond reach.

The solution finally came and it seemed all too obvious: a spiral structure emanating from a spiral plan. It was what we were seeking all along. We wanted a plan that resolved and expressed clearly the dynamic movement of the congregation around the altar while still acknowledging the symbolic and functional requirements of the sacramental spaces, particularly the baptistery. The space was to be structured to express the hierarchy of movement and function. The structure was to be so integral to the plan, to the space and to itself that no element could be removed or even changed. Reflected in the structure was the spiral, the asymmetry of the space, the entry for the people and finally the introduction of light. The introduction of light must not just happen, but must be a result of the structure rather than an imposition. The structure then opens naturally as required by function, and is also carried through consistently from the main central structure, to the subordinate structures over the sacristy, the confessionals, and the crowning 'cupola'. They are structural variations on the main spiral theme.

The rectory, although in a different location relative to the church, still loomed heavily as a design element. To integrate it into the scheme we assumed it as the first element in the rhythmic transition from rectangular to the curvilinear. This consideration, as well as the slope of the beams, suggested a variation in the brick walls from the high walls in the smaller sacristy spaces near the vestry to the low walls at the sanctuary. The buttress also varies in depth according to the angle of the beam.

The brick walls and floor are used as the binding matrix. Springing up from this molded brick basin is the swirling wood superstructure.



Precious Blood Church

