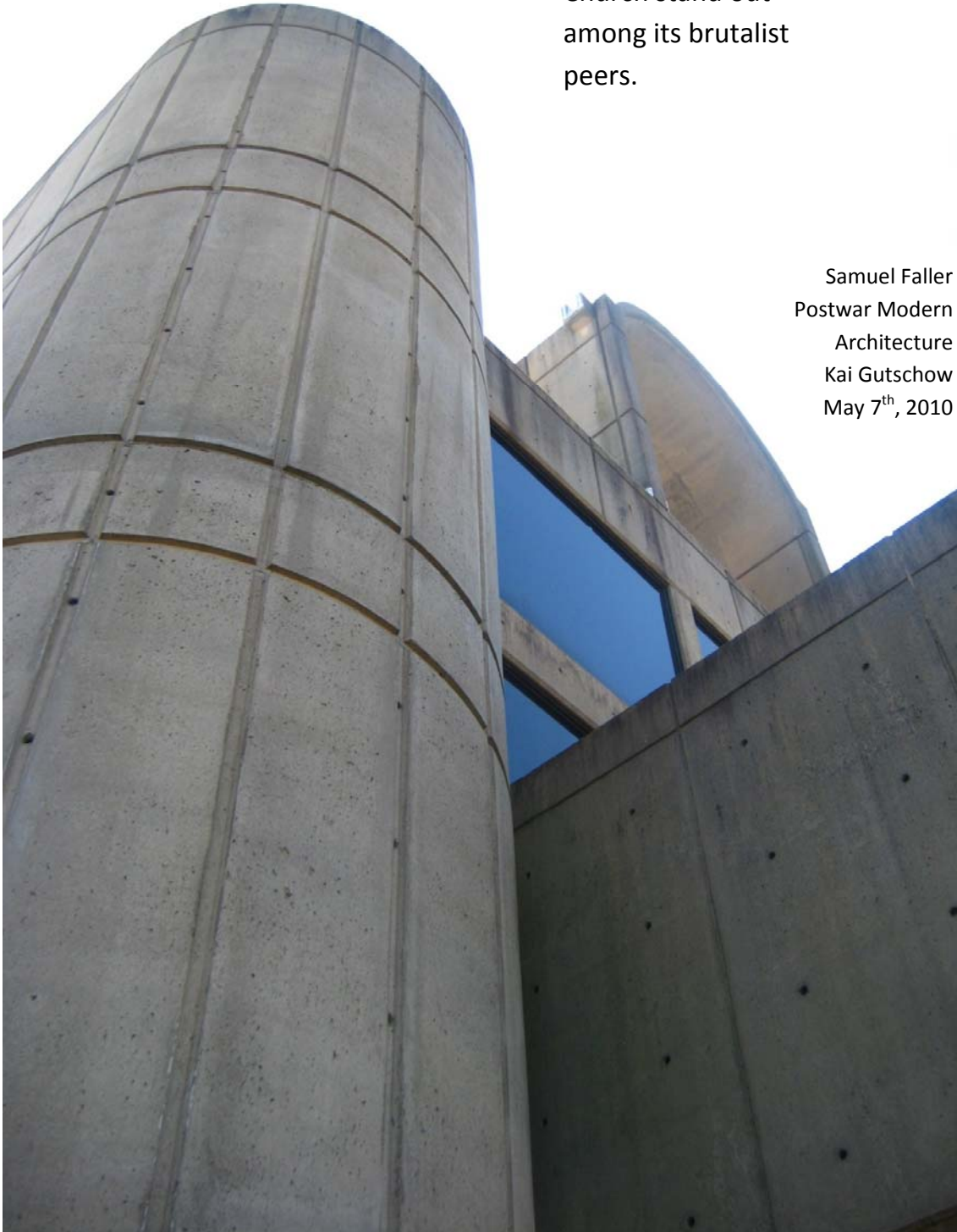


Culture in Concrete

What makes one
Church stand out
among its brutalist
peers.

Samuel Faller
Postwar Modern
Architecture
Kai Gutschow
May 7th, 2010



In the postwar era, Christian churches flourished. Returning soldiers, disillusioned by war, went back to church as the flood of optimism that surrounded the country swept up the religious world. In one Pittsburgh journal it was noted: “More churches, and more costly churches, are being built in the America of today than ever before.”¹ As they built, some of these churches offered architects a great venue for architectural liberty because of their eagerness for social prominence, and their willingness to pay for more expressive tendencies. Other churches, because of a more modest budget, turned to new technology as a way of saving money while still preserving social distinction. Both sought a new form of architecture for an evolving view of the worship space, and for the changing values of society at large. Because of this, the huge number of church buildings built showed a great amount of experimentation in contemporary design.

It is in this context that we find many of Pittsburgh’s churches keeping pace with the trends of the architectural world, especially the Modern movement. As one Pittsburgh critic states, “Contemporary artists and architects and theologians are trying, with renewed vigor, to create a spiritual image which will speak for our own place and time. They are deeply concerned with building churches for modern man.”² As architects explored the delicate issues of church building, their concept of modern man led to three fundamental principles of church design: “the awareness of space . . . , the use of truthful and unadorned materials, and the evocative use of light.”³

Of the many churches in Pittsburgh that embody these ideals a few stand out. Saint Peter’s Roman Catholic Church in the South Side, built in 1954, shows the trend in using material choice to designate quality above the use of ornament.^a Saint Thomas-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church in Gibsonia shows a similar formal restraint, exercising a more abstract

¹ Gibson pg. 23

² Jena

³ Kilde pg. 179

sensibility through the play of light on materials^{4 b}. As modernism progressed, many trends emphasized contextualization and the introduction of more symbolic, expressive elements. Though this tendency is implicit in the two buildings already discussed, it is even more clearly seen in the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in the Northside, built in 1960. The concrete arches spanning the roof are reminiscent of ancient structures, while the assembly area is surrounded by a colored glass enclosure, meant to achieve the same quality of light as stained glass but without the ornament^c. This also speaks loudly to both the truthful use of material and the evocative quality of light shared by the other churches.

Even among these, the Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Cathedral in Whitehall (henceforth referred to as “the Cathedral”) is one church which is very unique. There is no singular element of the building which is particularly innovative, but rather it is the appropriate combination of several seemingly incongruous elements that gives the building its value. Upon arrival at the building, the first thing one notices is the overwhelming use of concrete.^d Other buildings built under the same style have been labeled as “Brutalist” structures, because of the brutality, or honesty, of the material palette; currently, many of these concrete buildings are being torn down because of our society’s perception that they are unsightly and overbearing. Yet, the idea of church is meant, in our current understanding, to evoke beautiful and compelling imagery. Thus the ingrained view of this application of concrete strikes a paradoxical chord in our minds. In addition, the Orthodox Church is understood to be a very traditional and conservative sect of the Christian faith, so it is confusing that they would practice their beliefs in such an unconventional structure. However, as soon as one enters and begins to interact with the building, the appropriateness of these decisions becomes clear. The architect’s ability to combine a very conservative program to a very Modern style makes this building invaluable to architects today. The

⁴ Pekruhn

Cathedral stands as one building in which the Brutalist aesthetic is aptly and skillfully applied. Franklin Toker, in one of his books on Pittsburgh buildings, claims it to have “an extraordinary degree of self-assurance and nobility” and deems the building to be “majestic.”⁵ To understand what makes this structure successful where others failed, begins with understanding the architect.

Jovan Vlastimir Tomich (November 9, 1929-October 18, 2001), nicknamed John V. Tomich, was born and raised in Yugoslavia. His father, the very Reverend Vlastimir Tomich (1894-1977) served as a chaplain in the Yugoslavian army⁶, which led to their family’s capture and imprisonment in a German POW camp during World War II. After they were liberated, the family stayed in Italy for a couple years trying to get home to Belgrade. It wasn’t until 1947, when John was 18 years old, that they moved to the United States, first to Nebraska, and then East into Pittsburgh in 1949. The very Reverend Vlastimir Tomich led the Serbian parish in Aliquippa which Jovan himself would later attend. Having moved around so extensively, Jovan had exposure to many different Serbian Orthodox congregations and their architecture. The influence of these times and the influence of his father gave him a deep appreciation for the Serbian heritage and culture.⁷

After moving, Jovan served in the Intelligence branch of the US Army for two years⁸, then went to college at the University of Pittsburgh for language studies, and stayed for a five year master’s program, specializing in French and German.⁹ The year after he graduated, he moved on to Carnegie Technical Institute, graduating in 1960 with a Bachelor’s degree in Architecture, at the age of 41.¹⁰ At the time, Paul Schweiker was the chairman of the school of architecture. The nature of his work, and his fascination with materials (especially with

⁵ Toker

⁶ Obituaries

⁷ Bizic

⁸ Bizic

⁹ Tannler

¹⁰ “John Vlastimir Tomich”

concrete) and monumentality may have been an influential role in the developments that we see in the cathedral in Whitehall. Incidentally, he designed a church which was completed in 1960 which received international attention¹¹ and it is reasonable to assume that Jovan had at least some understanding of the project. Schweikher's Trinity Presbyterian Church^e in East Liverpool Ohio was a small church, with very little programmatically to distinguish it. What it was praised for was its innovative use of concrete, which contrasted the various construction methods of concrete as a way of distinguishing programmatic details. The structure is all precast concrete, while the cladding is pressed blocks, and only the altar, sanctuary and choir (all in the front of the building) are designated with cast-in-place concrete, particularly elegant in a "primitive, stomping, Stonehenge way."¹² If this did not inspire him to use concrete directly, it at least taught him the importance of material in designating space.

John's work with local, innovative architects was perhaps more influential on his design talent and skill. He worked in 1962 for Curry and Martin as a draftsman in Sewickly for two years. Then in 1964 went to work for Campbell, Green, Cuzolo as a Sr. designer and Job Captain.¹³ In 1967, when John applied for a place in the AIA, Grant Curry Jr. was the president of both the Pittsburgh AIA and Pennsylvania Association of Architects. His firm, Curry and Martin (which was soon to be Curry, Martin, Highberger and Klaus) was located in Sewickly, PA, near John's house. The firm designed mostly schools, since Martin was an education specialist. John may have worked as a draftsman on a number of projects during his years there, but most prominently, the firm designed renovations for the Ellis School, the Fraternity quadrangle at Carnegie Mellon University, and Montour High School.^f One element all of these designs share with the Cathedral is their use of negative space to

¹¹ Maguire

¹² Maguire

¹³ "John Vlastimir Tomich"

accentuate geometric forms. These designs incorporate brick as a major design element, expressed as a solid into which voids (of another material) are carved to denote entrances and windows. This massing strategy actually creates space by using the space between masses; in this thinking, instead of merely creating volumes which you occupy, the architect designs the structure such that you also can occupy the spaces implied by the volumes. This type of expression is most clear when observing connections between forms, which try to preserve the clarity of the volumes themselves. These “joints” are often just filled in windows or doors which allow clear distinctions between forms.

This type of thinking was not merely constrained to Martin and Curry but had been relevant to all of Modernism, tracing its roots back to the Bauhaus with the introduction of Gestalt theory into architecture; Curry and Martin simply serve as a good example to illustrate an important aspect of John’s design for the Cathedral. The geometric volumes of the Cathedral are easily visible from a distance. The two stair towers flanking the entrance are reminiscent of the cylinders flanking the entrance to Louis Kahn’s National Assembly Building in Bangladesh (finished in 1974).^g A solid, cantilevered block with a carved arch perches between these two masses over the entrance. It frames the doorway and window which occupy the void created by the supporting forms. The arched vaults which cover the classrooms seem to float, accentuated by the glass infill, and all the windows are consistently treated in a similar fashion. Even in the stairwell, the concrete railings are separated at each level to create more distinct volumes. In this light, the whole building seems only to be a set of simple volumes arranged together, creating space by their interaction.^h

When John went to work for Campbell, Green, Cunzolo, he learned much of the technical competence needed to complete the Cathedral. The firm itself was just as much an engineering firm as it was an architectural one. It was during this time that he became a registered architect in Pennsylvania. The Cathedral was built almost entirely of panel-formed

concrete with its characteristic plug holes. This same method was employed by Campbell, Green, Cunzolo, in their Parkway West Technical High School¹⁴, completed in 1969.¹⁴ John left the firm while they were in the design stages of the High School, but this building shows an uncanny relationship to the Cathedral in material choice. It may be deduced that he used this material in the Cathedral simply because he was familiar with it, but I would contend that there were far greater reasons driving the architect's choice.

He began his own firm in 1967, when he was offered his first project, the Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Cathedral. The fact that it was his first professional project is notable in at least one way: given a project of considerable scope and budget, his excitement mixed with naivety may have allowed him to explore building ideas that would have otherwise seemed implausible. It is also interesting that the idea of choosing an unproven architect went against the common church building practices of the time.

Starting in the mid-19th century, the architectural society at large had been increasingly more professional (more specialized). This phenomenon had originally led to the widespread Gothic revival,¹⁵ and was now shown through the practices of Modernism. The advent of this professionalized version of the architect changed the role of the architect in how they related to their clients significantly. One theologian reflects this bias in the following way:

“Wherever old churches are remodeled now, the interiors become real sanctuaries rather than auditoriums or museums; and new edifices are receiving the skilled and meaningful treatment of the *finest building artists* of our era.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Parkway

¹⁵ Kilde pg. 163

¹⁶ Gibson, 23 (emphasis added)

Gibson, through the entirety of his discourse, speaks of the architect as valued for his architectural prowess much more than his religious understanding. Often this change in value meant that the architecture conformed more to global church-building trends, and the architectural society than it did to the specific congregation itself, regardless of the architect's best intentions. That is why it is precisely Jovan's connection with the Serbian Orthodox Church, and his deep understanding of the needs of his client that allowed him to effectively bridge the connection between the "modern" style of the day, and the Serbian needs. Of the architects who were interviewed for the job, he was chosen specifically because of his involvement in the community.

The events leading up to the new facility were interesting times. The first Serbian Orthodox church in the South Side of Pittsburgh was begun in 1906. Having moved into the steel city for the prospect of finding good work in the steel industry, the many Serbs had found enough cause and support to start their own congregation. They started small in a transformed house church, but later upgraded by buying a Lutheran church on 16th street in 1911. In 1935 this church then split, due to disagreements over the situation in Europe and economic hardship in the US; the offshoot group moved into an old Russian church just five blocks away, naming themselves St. Sava's Serbian Orthodox church.¹⁷

The two congregations would not reunify until 1962, and when they did there was no longer enough room in either of the two buildings for the whole congregation. They sought out different venues for a solution, and in 1967 were given a generous donation of land in Whitehall, PA, by Ms. Colteryahn.¹⁸ Being just a short drive away from the Southside into the suburbs, the new land was ideal for the Church building for an expanding and settling congregation. The expectations for the new building were set high. It was seen as a symbol of unity and restoration, and a place for strong community and interaction. The Serbs have a

¹⁷ Homepage

¹⁸ Holy Trinity

very strong community as it is, because they are bound together both by their heritage, and by their loss of heritage. The wars and distress in what is now Serbia have continued to bring immigrants to the US, and challenged the Serbian community here to continue to support one another and keep their heritage alive.

Jovan, coming into this scene as a younger member of the congregation was chosen initially for his association with his father, and his own faith. Having descended from a very prominent priest, he understood the necessity of tradition and heritage in the church for the sake of internal unity. Thus, the schematic layout of the design began and ended with traditionally inspired moves. The basic layout separates two functional aspects, the educational and office spaces and the worship space. The original design also had a community hall, but they failed to build it because of a lack of money.¹⁹ This separation, made distinct by the narrow hallway and transparency of the bridge emphasizes the fundamental distinction between sacred space and everyday space. Whether one enters the nave from the offices or from outdoors, he has to pass through the narthex, which is even further distinguished from the Sanctuary, indicative of the levels of sacred space found in all traditional religious architecture, and especially relevant to the Orthodox tradition.²⁰

The plan of the Worship space follows a simple, centrally planned scheme, which has been used for Christian gathering places since the third century.²¹ Originally, centrally planned spaces were used by Christians to demarcate an important burial site or for baptisms, but by the 7th century, even the largest church in the world, the Hagia Sophia, was built around a central plan. The emphasis of this plan was on God himself, and the individual's (as opposed to the priest's or the leader's) connection to Him. By placing the worshippers under the highest portion of the dome, the building itself gave value to them as a part of the service.

¹⁹ Finance Chairman

²⁰ Kilde pg. 59

²¹ Kilde pgs. 33-37

Many of the original Serbian churches were modeled after the centrally planned Byzantine church²¹. The tradition of modeling new churches after older ones is a continuing legacy within the Serbian Orthodox Church.²² The building allowed for many of the traditional details to be included as well, like the iconostas, which was fabricated and painted in Belgrade, as well as all the other wooden articles including the pews and the Altar table.²³ These details were surprisingly sparse in a building which is so architecturally minimal already.

The building also has many traditional features which are not visible in plan. The layout of the domes covering the main hall are similar even to the Hagia Sophia in the way they cascade down and the way in which the upper portions are flooded with light as if to be detached. Many centrally planned churches had similar features because of limitations in material spans and construction capabilities. The use of concrete allowed Jovan to sharpen the edges on some of these rising spaces, creating an interesting juxtaposition between linear and curved forms. The two stair towers in the front of the building capture the tower elements in many churches which demarcate the entry and make the building more massive.

In terms of function, the building works superb for exactly what it was purposed for. The only difference that George Topich recalls from any other Serbian church that he's been to is the placement of the choir on the third floor above the Nave.²⁴ Jovan Tomich had a particularly good voice, so his innovation in the choir loft only seems appropriate. George reflected that the voices descending from above sound ethereal and calming, perfect for allowing you to focus on God.²⁵ The only problem identified with the performance of the building was the heating problem. The concrete is a great storage mass for better or for worse.

²² Finance Chairman

²³ Holy Trinity

²⁴ Finance Chairman

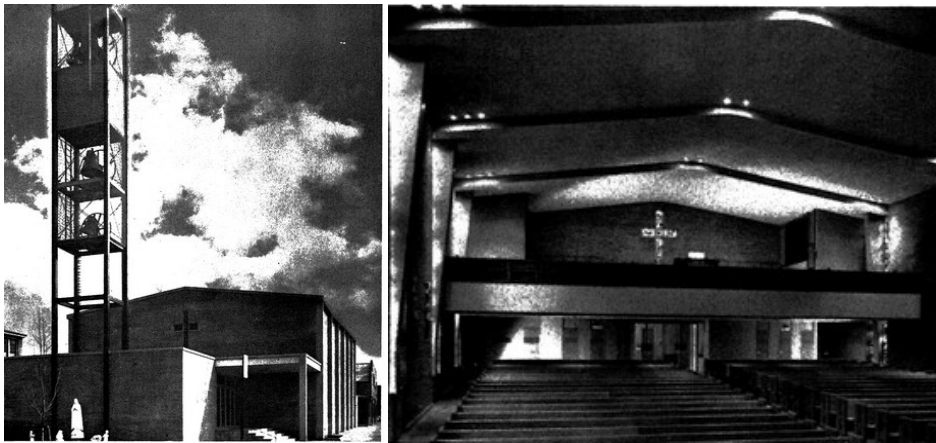
²⁵ Finance Chairman

The real innovation then, lies in the way that the building presents itself to the public. In addition to desiring unity among the Serbs themselves, they wanted to present a unified image to the public, as a display of their Serbian pride. I believe that they wanted to make a statement, as most churches do, that would last indefinitely. Building this church would be a monument to God and to the Serbian community. It is only fitting the architect chose concrete for everything. The concrete allowed him the plasticity of form to simultaneously accomplish all the aspects of the structure and the formal qualities with the same material. Because they are all the same material, each volume and shape becomes just a part of a strengthened whole, in the same way that one person becomes an active part of the community through shared beliefs.

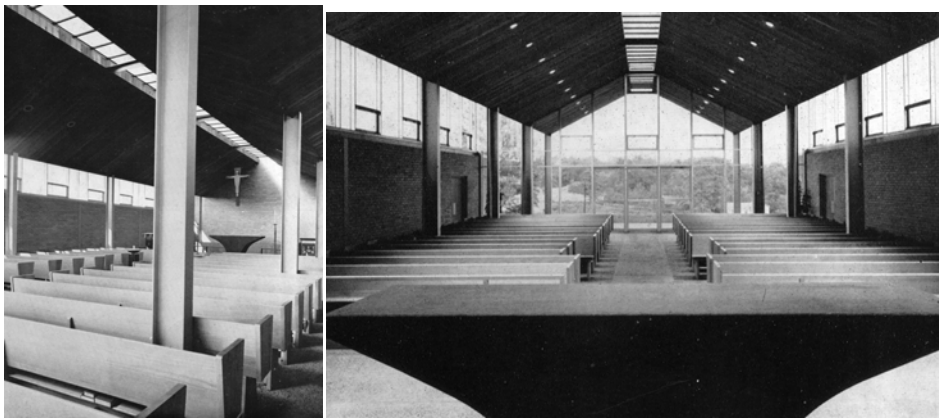
It is clear that the architect's choice of concrete was not one of simply convenience or coincidence also because he consciously chose not to use concrete in his very next building, the St. Elijah church center in Aliquippa^k (1971); he chose instead an exterior of orange stone, used in the context of the church next door, with the interior of simple plaster and siding. The Cathedral is still in use, and now houses two congregations instead of one. In 2000, there was a renovation done to the interior which added some colors and added more paintings behind the altar. The people still value it a lot, and respect John for what he had done. But sometimes, in our mechanized world, we lose sight of the value of architects who are very invested in the communities they aspire to help, but this building, through John Tomich's hard work, should remind us of that value, and encourage us to design for the things which we care about.

Image Gallery:

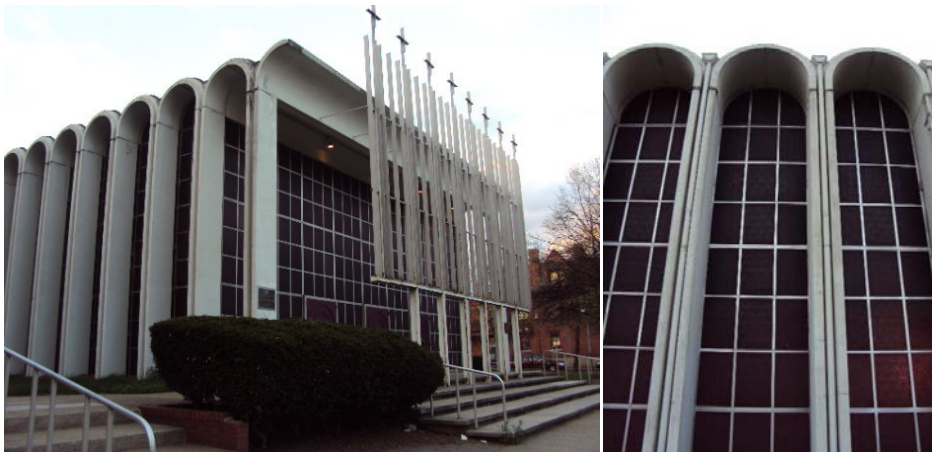
a: St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church, Southside



b: St. Thomas-in-the-Fields Church, Gibsonia



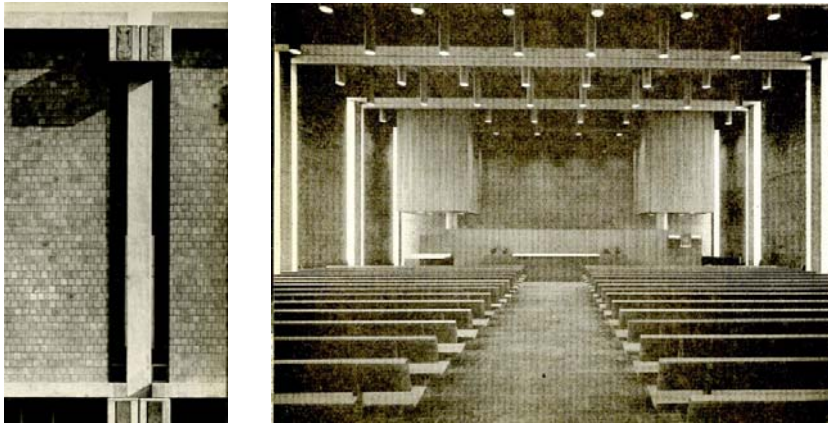
c: Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, Northside



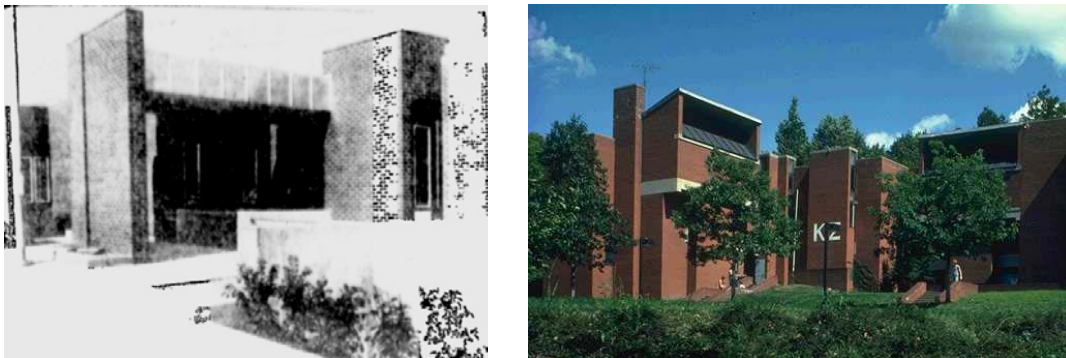
d: Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Cathedral; Entrance



e: Trinity Presbyterian Church, Liverpool Ohio



f: Montour High School, and the CMU Quadrangle: Curry and Martin

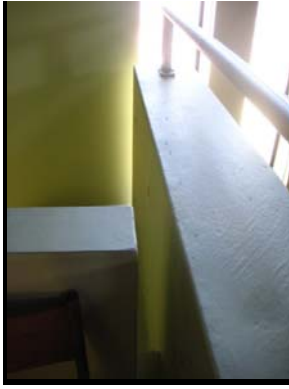


g: National Assembly Building, Louis Kahn, Bangladesh; The Serbian Orthodox Cathedral



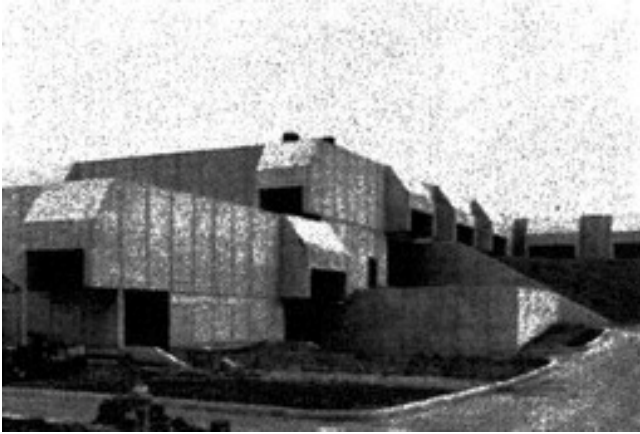
h: The Cathedral; Simplified forms and negative space





handrail details

i: Parkway West Technical High School



j: Traditional Serbian Churches.

Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Cathedral, Kosovo (no longer exists);
Gradac Monastery, Raska area 13th century



k: St. Elijah Serbian Church Center, Jovan Tomich 1972



Other Serbian Orthodox Cathedral images; Main hall



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