

History

This architecture exemplifies what should be true of the life of every Christian: that it is founded on the heritage of the past, but takes always new forms relevant to the present age.

- Robert Lee Stuart

Looking Back

First Methodist Church was established in Palo Alto in 1894, the year the city was incorporated. Land, encompassing most of the current site at Hamilton Avenue and Webster Street, had been donated and money had been pledged for construction of a church building. During the planning and construction period, the 24 charter members of the church met for Sunday services in Nor-tree Hall, a meeting room over a store on University Avenue. By the

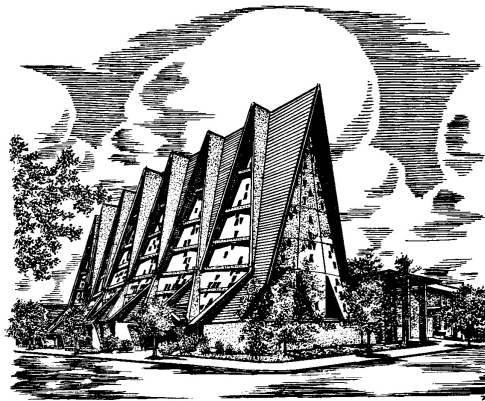


First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto

A Welcoming and Reconciling Congregation

time the picturesque redwood church was completed two years later, membership had grown to 58.

Within the next 15 years, the membership flourished and outgrew the original redwood church. The congregation built an esthetically pleasing traditional style white stucco house of worship, dedicated in 1914, on the site of the redwood church, which had been moved to the other side of Webster for use as a temporary meeting house during construction. The stucco church building was enlarged and remodeled with a new parsonage in 1948, major remodeling in 1949, and a new education building and fellowship hall in 1952 (designed by Carlton Arthur



Steiner, architect of the present church building, and remodeled in 2000). But in 1957, the congregation recognized the need for a newer, larger house of worship. At this time, they also made a commitment to remain on the same site and to build a major downtown church, rather than move to another area of Palo

Alto where land was less expensive.

Dreams to Reality

The next four years comprised a massive planning effort by the committees of church members lead by Dr. (later Bishop) R. Marvin Stuart and aided by professional consultants. They grappled with the issue of probable needs of the church in coming decades, and they were committed to creating a nontraditional and architecturally spectacular house of worship that would inspire greater participation by the congregation. In addition, they wanted the new church to be a place where the community could meet for musical and cultural events.

During this period, Carlton Arthur Steiner of Berkeley was selected to be architect of this challenging project. The building site included the area covered by the old church building and one additional lot acquired on Webster Street. Finally the plans were drawn and approved and construction on the 1,050-person capacity "Contemporary Gothic" building began. General contractor was Theo G. Meyer and Sons of San Francisco.

The construction process took two years, ending with consecration in 1963. During construction, the congregation held services in the Varsity Theatre (now Borders Books). After completion, the Palo Alto Times (10/31/64) stated that the new church was "often called the most spectacular church on the midpeninsula."

About the Architect

At the time Carlton Arthur "Art" Steiner was chosen to be architect of the new sanctuary, he had not yet designed a church building. Holder of bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture from U.C. Berkeley, and for six years on the faculty there, his architectural practice included commercial and residential work. The selection committee, however, discerned that he had the creativity and vision needed to provide them with the bold, out of the ordinary design that they so wanted. He submitted "many, many" sketches; finally one was accepted. When asked what was the biggest challenge of the design and building process, Mr. Steiner replied, "Satisfying the building committee!"

The Building Process

The "bones" of the new sanctuary were 19 massive poured-in-place concrete piers that extend from beneath the basement level upward to meet 73 feet above the main aisle. Other basic structural elements were poured in place except the roof panels, which were precast, raised by a crane, and tied together at the ridge. 1,500 brilliantly hued small glass inserts were installed from a high interior scaffold. To ensure good acoustics, the face of the balcony was undulated. The unique circular motif lighting fixtures, made of spun steel with brass finish, weigh 600 lbs each and were bolted to the

roof. (As the building neared completion, Mr. Steiner and Dr. Stuart, in a mischievous moment, scaled the scaffold to carve their initials high above the chancel!)

Adjacent to the sanctuary, accessed by the narthex, the simple, intimate (140-person capacity) Dwelle Memorial Chapel was constructed. Architecturally conventional, it utilized several items from the prior church on that site: altar, pulpit, communion rail, and two beautiful stained glass windows: Christ kneeling in Gethsemane and Christ knocking at the door of Everyman's life. The 14,000-square-foot lower level comprises meeting and storage rooms, a kitchen, and two sunken gardens.

The actual building process took two years and cost approximately \$1,350,000 all inclusive (sanctuary, chapel, lower level, organ, furnishings, landscaping, and all fees). It was said that the general contractor lost a considerable amount of money on the project.

Inside the Sanctuary

The circle, without beginning and end, a symbol for expressing the eternalness of God, can be seen throughout the sanctuary: on the hand-carved reredos (screen) framing the cross, in the chancel railing, in the pew ends, and in the light fixtures. The cross is Latin, shown empty, representing the risen and living Christ. Each of the candelabra represents the three lights of the Trinity. The communion table and baptismal font, made of white Vermont marble, represent the two sacraments.

The colorful banners on each side of the sanctuary are symbolic remind-



ers of God's two promises to us: On the left side, the blue/green banners represent baptism and God's offering of grace and unending love. On the right side, the red/gold banners stand for the wind and flame of Pentecost, God's gift of presence and power, and promise to be with us in the here and now and always.

The Merritt C. Speidel Memorial Organ, recently extensively renovated and enhanced, occupies a unique niche in the Bay Area. Capable of satisfying the requirements of all liturgical and concert literature, it can additionally render 19th and 20th century organ literature with distinctive flair and fidelity. Thanks to its outstanding acoustic and esthetic qualities, the sanctuary regularly hosts performances of groups such as the Philharmonia Baroque, New Century Chamber Orchestra, and Midsummer Mozart Festival.

Written by Toby Williams