

Thank Heavens...

...for the astute architecture and collaborative spirit of Andersson•Wise Architects, who transformed a cramped Colorado church into a space for an entire community to sing its praises

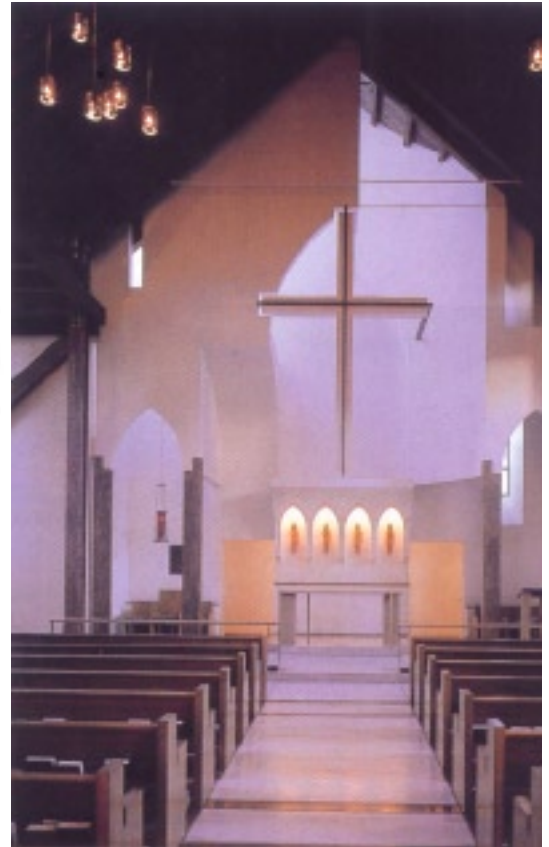
By Danine Alati
Photography by Timothy Hursley

In this time of economic distress, continuing conflict and bloodshed in the Middle East, and general disillusionment with high-ranking officials from national politicians to corrupt corporate executives to church leaders, it is encouraging to see that people still turn to prayer for solace. And for one community in Steamboat Springs, Colo., its cup runneth over at a local church so much so that the pastor had to figure out how to maximize the restricted site plan to accommodate all the parishioners who came to worship at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Not a problem once he called in Andersson•Wise Architects, whose designs for a church in Fargo, N.D., in the mid-1990s earned them this commission to renovate, update, and expand St. Paul's.

Constructed in 1911 out of local sandstone, the original church structure only sat 80 people. With parishioners pouring out the doors of each of the three Sunday services and especially on holidays, Rev. David Henderson recognized the need to increase space. And principal architects Arthur W. Andersson, AIA, and F. Christian Wise, AIA, of Andersson•Wise Architects in Austin, Texas, conducted full-day charrettes with the community to determine what else the end users felt was important in their house of worship.

"There was an emotional attachment to the original building," Andersson explains. With the new addition positioned adjacent to that structure, he says, "we wanted something that would not overwhelm and not ignore the original church." The architects found local stone to match the façade, and composed a mixture of layering stone and stucco for the addition. The key was striking a balance by "paying homage to the tradition of the church without replicating it," according to Henderson. Governing objectives that prevailed after the workshops with the congregation included creating something monastic in its simplicity, functional to accommodate the liturgical needs, and doubled in size without sacrificing warmth and intimacy. Henderson sought a sense of verticality, defining parishioners' relationship with God, and to balance that height with the horizontal aspect of community: "Churches-in-the-round with flexible seating are the current trend," Henderson notes. "But what's inspiring about the great churches of the world is how you snap your head back in awe and look up to the heavens." He somehow wanted the architects to respect the history of the church in a more contemporary—but not trendy—space.

"Comments we heard from the community were that they wanted 'simple elegance,' not overly conspicuous," Henderson says. "And the wood, polished concrete floors, and white walls achieve this effect." Plaster interior walls



The pastor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church did not want the massive volume of the space (right) to feel isolating; the architects accomplished a sense of warmth by using wood columns and timber frames to create a real architectural statement within the sanctuary (opposite).

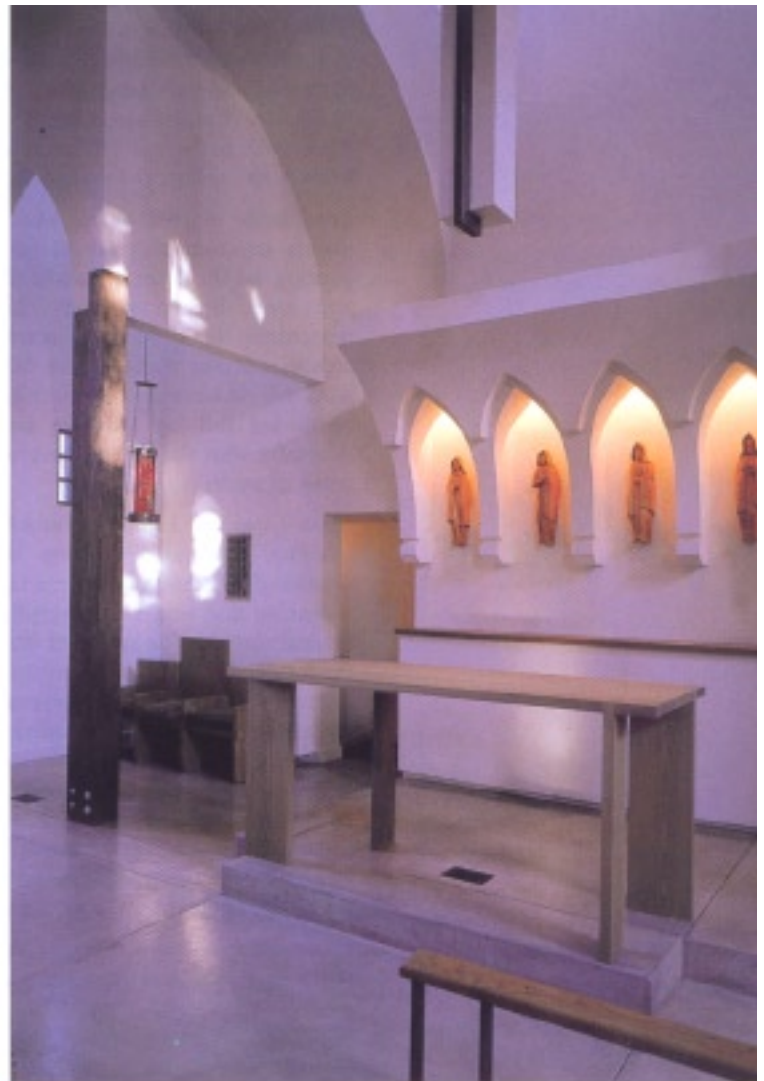
in a clean, off-white hue would not detract from the spoken Word and would allow parishioners to concentrate on their own personal thoughts. The palette almost creates a backdrop for when color is introduced in the form of flowers or celebratory banners. Windows were strategically located high overhead, placed where they would afford the most natural light to form shadows and silhouettes. The back of the altar appears dramatic due to the way light reflects off the white plaster. "There was such an incredible use of light. It was focused, channeled carefully, and used economically," Henderson notes. "Lighting makes the space look sacred with shadows; it constantly transforms the feeling of the space."

Andersson adds, "Material use was simple and honest. We weren't interested in doing something overly flamboyant—and neither was the congregation." The entire project was done in the spirit of collaboration, and although considering many differing opinions can sometimes prove challenging, the architects would not have done this project any other way. "We discussed what the congregation liked and disliked as far as textures, materials, and character for the space, and then we sculled together all the findings," Andersson says. "They understand that they're not architects, but they are using the space everyday so it's important for us to know what they want the church to look and feel like." And Wise adds, "It might be easier to work alone on a project, but that's not necessarily the best way. This was definitely much more rewarding, and it's almost the essential way to design a church."

There was a great desire within the congregation to construct a wooden church. But since an all-wood structure would not prove practical, the architects translated that request by constructing the "bones" of the church with wooden columns and heavy timber frames. "We wanted the wood to have a three-dimensional quality and set the tone for the building," Andersson says. Wood beams were actually constructed of recycled wood chips called Parallam, which in addition to being environmentally sustainable is extremely durable. "Parallam was a great way to achieve that heavy timber effect, and it made sense in multiple ways for its environmental properties and low cost," Wise says.

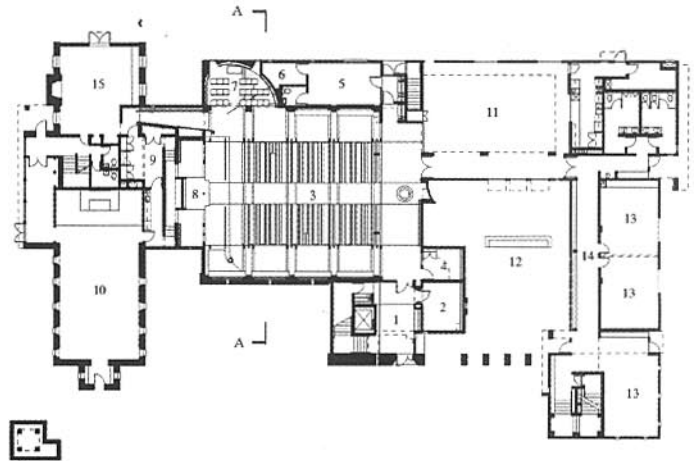
And while the architects were always conscious of the tight budget constraints, raising funds to support the design was a challenge. "Since we had to keep starting and stopping, we had to maintain the congregation's energy and enthusiasm throughout the three-year process," Andersson notes. But in the end St. Paul's became a real church of the people.

"In an architectural sense, it's rewarding to work on a sanctuary space—the shape, how light enters into the picture," Wise says. "It's exciting architecture. It allows you to do things in a way you wouldn't usually do. It brings in an artistic aspect." He adds, "After such a long process, it's incredible to watch the building that you built being consecrated, the symbolic christening of the space." What's not so amazing is the impact that this simple yet inspiring church renovation has had on a small Colorado community. ☐





Project Summary



By constructing the church addition out of local stone to match the 1911 structure's façade, Andersson•Wise references the original building without replicating it (above). Tall windows were judiciously positioned high on the wall to permit abundant natural light penetration (opposite left), which creates interesting lightplay and casts intriguing shadows on the crisp, off-white canvas of the back-of-altar area (opposite right).

Who

Project, client: St. Paul's Episcopal Church (and Whiteman Primary School). **Architect:** Andersson•Wise Architects; Arthur W. Andersson, AIA, principal; F. Christian Wise, AIA, principal; Timothy Dacey, Erlene Clark, Adam Pyrek, Steven Dvorak, Jim Moore, design team. **Structural engineer:** Studer Engineering. **Mechanical/electrical engineer:** Burke Associates. **Civil Engineer:** Civil Design Associates. **Specifications:** Eskilsson Architecture. **General contractor:** Holmquist-Lorenz Construction (church), Fox Construction (school). **Acoustician:** Adams & Associates. **Photographer:** Timothy Hursley.

What

Paint: Sherwin-Williams. **Solid Surfacing:** Fiberslate. **Dry wall:** USG. **Masonry:** Colorado Stone Company. **Flooring:** concrete and fir planks. **Carpet/carpet tile:** Beaulieu. **Ceiling:** exposed wood structure/gypsum board. **Lighting:** Halo, W.A.C., Elliptipar, custom-designed chandeliers. **Doors:** Amweld, custom. **Door hardware:** Hager, PDQ, Dorma, Baldwin, Custom. **Glass:** AFGD Glass. **Window frames:** custom by Window Company. **Railings:** Custom. **Main sanctuary seating:** The Marshall Co. **Liturgical furniture:** Custom designed and fabricated. **HVAC:** Burnham. **Fire safety:** Sure-lites, Grinnell. **Building management system:** Honeywell. **Plumbing fixtures:** Kohler, Delta.

Where

Location: Steamboat Springs, CO. **Total floor area:** 21,000 sq. ft. **No. of floors:** 2. **Crowd capacity:** 250. **Cost/sq. ft.:** \$142.