



Pollen at Peace

by Jen Wong

Project Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel Renovation, Campus Ministry Addition and The Claire Kolodzey Memorial Garden, St. Edward's University, Austin

Client St. Edward's University

Architect Pollen Architecture & Design

Design Team Elizabeth Alford, Assoc. AIA; Dason Whitsett; John Algood; Michael Young

Photographer Whit Preston

St. Edward's University in Austin — known previously for its green lawns, historic trees, and red roofs — has shed its image as a sleepy hilltop campus with a focused portfolio of buildings by notable architects from around the world. In the past 15 years, an ambitious campus master plan — developed by Sasaki Associates under the direction of President George E. Martin — has resulted in more than one million square feet of construction and renovation. While many of the new buildings have expressed this disruption directly, a recent renovation and expansion of the campus' long-standing chapel by Pollen Architecture & Design demonstrates elegant restraint.

Clad all in white, Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel and a newly added administrative building occupy a prominent corner of campus. The modest volumes are connected by a glass bridge that provides generous views of an integral meditation garden and the site's remarkable existing trees. The renovation transforms one of the oldest buildings on campus into a modern, light-filled space. “[Pollen was able] to see the

simple beauty and charm in a building that had layers of work,” says Father Peter Walsh, director of Campus Ministry. Constructed in 1897, the building served at different points as a theater, woodworking shop, bowling alley, and shooting range before it was designated a chapel in 1947.

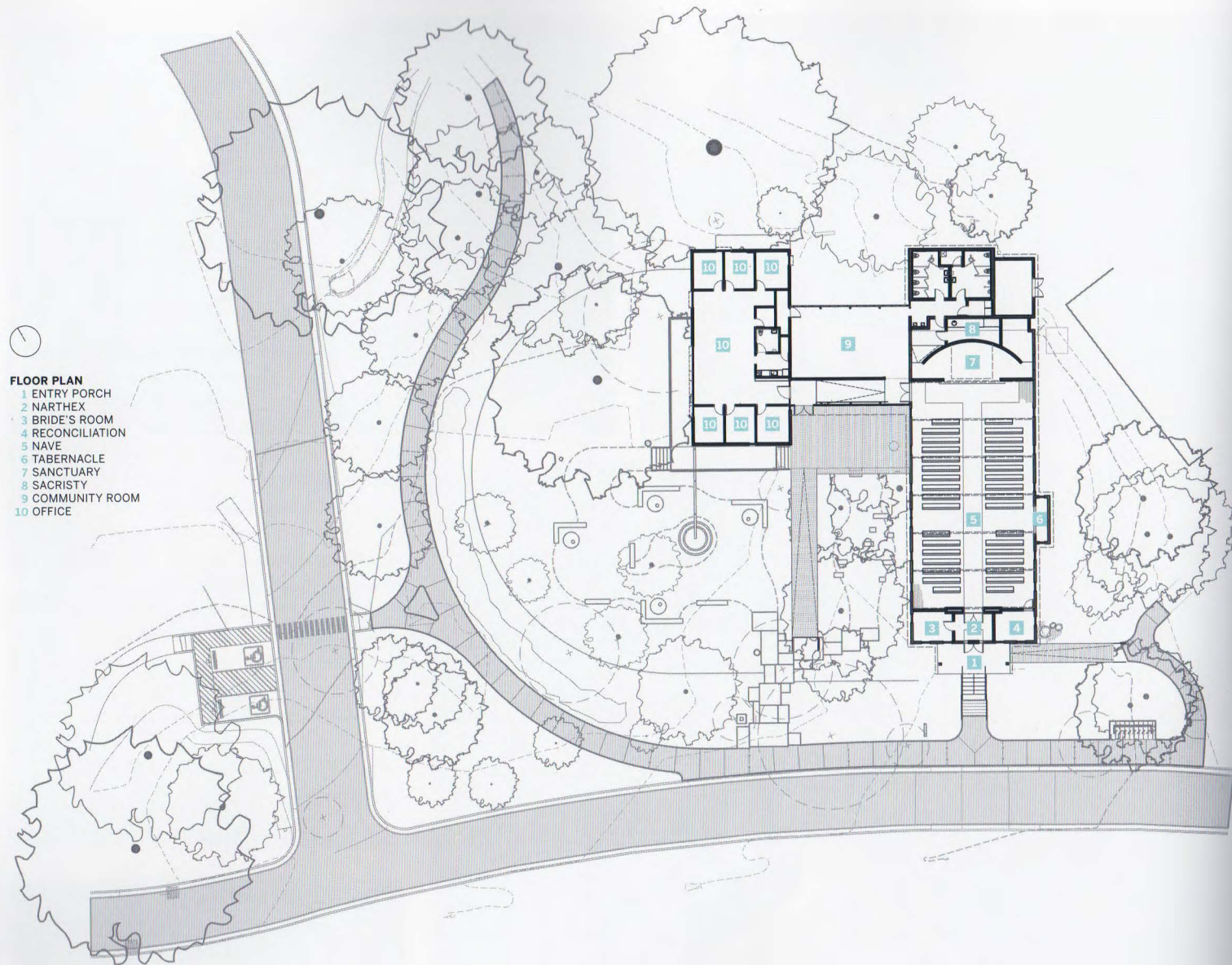
Pollen was awarded the project as the result of an invited competition for local architects. Interdisciplinary collaboration was a priority from the beginning, and the design team included Ten Eyck Landscape Architects and Maček Furniture Company. “Working with a large team leads you to places you wouldn't go by yourself,” says Elizabeth Alford, Assoc. AIA, co-founder of Pollen. Mark Maček adds, “It was great to have early participation in the project. I had a lot of free range, and it felt like what I was doing was really integral to the design.”

Much of the renovation work on the original building was achieved in a few deft moves. “We did some very quiet interventions,” says Alford. The entry sequence was transformed by expanding the porch, dissolving a tangle of handrails and



Opposite page *The existing chapel and an addition for Campus Ministry are connected by a glass bridge that dissolves into the site. **This page** Pollen worked closely with Ten Eyck Landscape Architects to preserve historic trees and create a meditation garden that both shelters and showcases the chapel's charming exterior.*





- FLOOR PLAN**
- 1 ENTRY PORCH
 - 2 NARTHEX
 - 3 BRIDE'S ROOM
 - 4 RECONCILIATION
 - 5 NAVE
 - 6 TABERNACLE
 - 7 SANCTUARY
 - 8 SACRISTY
 - 9 COMMUNITY ROOM
 - 10 OFFICE

ramps with stepped planters and clever grading, and introducing an open narthex between the newly added bridal and reconciliation rooms. At the other end of the elongated structure, the sanctuary was pushed back to maximize occupancy and pushed up to create clerestory windows that illuminate the apse. The resulting overhead light from the north and south strengthens the building's connection to the site, allowing subtle changes outside to filter into the space. Extraneous layers were stripped away to reveal original oak floors and streamlined scissor trusses, and the trusses and ceiling were painted white. A new layer of pine siding lines the east and west interior walls, introducing a warmth that only wood can bring. The resulting space is at once open and contained, simple and transcendent.

Pollen's interventions set the stage for a collection of liturgical furnishings designed by Maček, featured prominently throughout the chapel. Catholic tradition attributes great significance to these objects, and here their local connection gives them special meaning. Many of the pieces, including the altar, baptismal font, crucifix, tabernacle, ambo, and ambry, were made from lumber collected from two fallen cedar elms and a walnut tree on-site. Maček retained the thickness of the material to instill a sense of permanence and stability in the main pieces, then subtracted a distinct geometric volume from each one. To him, the voids represent the simultaneous inevitability and ambiguity of a higher order. Maček extended the project's spirit of collaboration to bring in fellow Austin artisans: Rebecca Cantos-Busch

carved the abstract corpus of poplar; Kathleen Ash of Studio K created the fused glass baptismal vessel; and Hawkeye Glenn machined five candleholders of milled steel and bronze. In addition to the chapel, the campus master plan called for the construction of a building for the Campus Ministry, as well as an all-faiths contemplative garden. Pollen proposed that the ministry offices be integrated in a scheme that tucks the volume behind the garden, lending visual prominence to the chapel from the street. The Campus Ministry building — which houses a reception area, conference room, and offices — reinterprets the shell of the chapel and is joined by a multifunctional glass volume that provides internal circulation, access to service areas, and a flexible community room.



This page Housed in the simple, light-filled interior of the chapel is a collection of liturgical furnishings by Maček Furniture Company. The entry doors are adorned with the vesica piscis, seen also in the altar and baptismal font. **Bottom right** The circulation corridor doubles as a multi-functional community space that opens to the gardens.

To the south, this bridge extends to a generous outdoor porch that steps into the garden; to the north, it provides panoramic views of the site's magnificent elms.

"We always design for buildings to flow from inside to outside, so the landscape architect is a really key part of our team," says Alford. Ten Eyck played an integral role in the siting and circulation of the project, and executed a scheme that incorporates native, drought-tolerant plantings and reconfigures the movement of water around the buildings. "I've always been interested in where water goes," notes Christine Ten Eyck. "I consider that sacred space in the project." Hedges along the perimeter of the site create a sense of enclosure around it, while an ephemeral moat creates a visible thread throughout. The meditation garden follows a circular path served by cast-in-place concrete

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benches, and it is centered on a water seep fed by an overhead rainwater collection system. A ramp leading to the Ministry building separates the meditation garden from an allée of elms that continues beyond the bridge.

Scattered throughout the addition are hints of Pollen's playful forays in materiality: Observe the custom clear-coat MDF doors, the use of galvanized metal fins to delineate irregular breaks in the HardiePanel siding, and the careful patterning of BamDeck members on the porch. The project is a wonderful example of Pollen's light touch and commitment to detail. "You don't need a tremendous budget to have a space that is well designed and rich," says Alford. Adds project manager John Algood, "We still did the things we always do — focus on how materials can go together in more elegant and inventive ways."

Jen Wong is director and curator of the University Co-op Materials Lab at The University of Texas at Austin.