

Say Goodbye to the Alumni Meditation Chapel

For 42 years, a small, but strikingly modern building has been located a few yards east of Green Hall. A grove of oak and sycamore trees tends to obscure it from collegians as they walk between their residence halls and the Roscoe L. West Library or classroom buildings to the north and west.

Originally conceived in 1954 as a traditional Georgian-style interfaith chapel, to be a gift from the Alumni Association to The College for its centennial anniversary in 1955, the project was six years in development. By the time it was dedicated on May 14, 1960, its design had undergone a complete change, with an ultra-modern curving roof sweeping down from above the front entrance and then up, steeple-like, to frame an A-shaped, stained-glass window facing the library. While the reasons for the change in look are clouded by the passage of time, it appears that the late **Charles E. Metzger '28**, Centennial Committee chairman, was an important influence.

Evidently the first mention of a chapel came at a planning meeting that members of the Alumni Centennial Committee had with a group of students and faculty. Then Dean of Students Vernetta Decker proposed an inter-faith chapel, and Metzger won support for the idea from the association at its

Oct. 24, 1954, meeting. He and others spent much of the next 18 months soliciting money from alumni and faculty.

According to reports in *The Signal*, the original plan called for a 50-seat, Georgian-style building costing about \$30,000–35,000. Only \$20,000, however, had been raised by the time officials finally broke ground at the Homecoming meeting of the alumni in May 1957. (It was the second groundbreaking for the chapel. A year earlier, Metzger and then President Roscoe L. West had broken ground in a wooded area near Kendall Hall at the west end of Green Hall. Later, at the request of the state, officials decided on the present locale.) The untimely death that fall of a Mr. VanNuys, the architect engaged to design the chapel, further complicated matters. After contacting two other architectural firms, the committee engaged the Somerville partnership of Scrimenti, Swackhamer and Perantoni, to carry on. All the principals of that firm have died, but according to Richard B. Shive, a retired architect, it was the late Adolph Scrimenti who conceived the design and managed the project.

In the 1950s all state college construction was supervised from a central office in Trenton, which tended to produce—dare we say it—practical,

unimaginative structures. But since the chapel was being built by the alumni for The College, the builders were free to employ their own architect. This, combined with the need to scale back plans to accommodate the money available, the architect's desire to produce an exciting modern design, and the willingness of the building committee to do something unusual, led to a modern look. In 1962, the New Jersey Society of Architects gave one of its three commendations that year to the Somerville architects for their chapel design.

To save money, the committee turned to **Walter Macak '48**, who had returned to become an associate professor of industrial arts. Macak, now 83 and living on a picturesque farm in Sergeantsville, recalls recruiting a handful of his students to do most of the work on the fieldstone walls.

John Weingartner '60 was one of those students. Retired after a career as a teacher in New Jersey schools and as professor of industrial arts at Los Angeles Community College in California, he remembers scouring for rock along the fence rows and streambeds of Macak's farm, trucking about 10

loads at two or three tons each back to the Ewing campus. "I know we had a couple of blowouts on our tires from hauling those heavy rocks," he said, recalling that he was paid 90 cents per hour for his labor. Gradually, over two summers, Macak and his students readied the walls for the complex superstructure and roof to follow.

The roof was both the key design element and the most difficult part to construct. It was described by Shive as a "sort of warped plane," by an engineering professor as "kind of a double parabola," and by a college librarian as just like the French nun's starched hat in the children's book *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans. Laminated girders support a curved wood surface that, in turn, is covered with Hylon, a rubber sheeting product made by DuPont. Shive recalls the material as relatively new to the building industry at the time, and frequently was used to cover "sculptural architecture" made of reinforced concrete.

In this instance, however, it had to be glued to a wood surface, which sweeps sharply up from the horizontal to within a few degrees of vertical.



It was a cool day in May 1960, when the chapel was dedicated.

As Shive explained it, the weight of the sheeting made gluing it to the “steeple” end of the chapel very difficult, with the surface looking at first like a failed facelift. Eventually, however, the contractor got it right, and the chapel roof remains the most distinctive building surface for miles around.

Although it was neither completed nor paid for at the time, the Alumni Meditation Chapel finally was dedicated with considerable pomp May 14, 1960.

College President Edward L. Martin accepted it. In addition to the many alumni and college officials, representatives of local Presbyterian, Hebrew, and Ukrainian Orthodox congregations attended. Also among the guests that day were young Jay and Jeanne Perantoni, son and daughter of a principal owner of the architectural firm. Today both are architects and principals in their father’s successor firm, SSP Architectural Group.

Jay Perantoni went on to study architecture at Princeton University. As an undergraduate there, he said he visited the chapel at Trenton State College several times, “as I felt more at peace within its intimate space than I did in all the pomp and grandeur of Princeton University’s own ‘chapel.’”

Work on the heating and electrical system was not completed until early 1961 and, in spite of repeated campaigns, the total cost of \$28,000 was not fully paid until the next year. While alumni contributed most of the money, students allocated \$4,500 of their activities funds to the chapel project.

Over the years, the chapel was the scene of numerous weddings, baptisms, and memorial services. Its small interior space (there was room for only 54 chairs) made it impractical for many group events. This year it was used for regular Catholic services twice a week, and for weekly meetings of the campus Protestant Fellowship, Gospel Choir, and Alcoholics Anonymous.

The College’s master plan for future construction, approved by the trustees last year, calls for demolishing the chapel this winter to make room for a new library between the existing library and Eickhoff Hall (the former Commons). A new chapel is planned for a nearby site in front of Decker Hall; it will be larger and have both a main assembly hall and additional rooms for meetings or offices. As the design on page three of this issue reveals, it will be in keeping with other Georgian-colonial buildings on campus.

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