

OnSite

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Bold and beautiful

Suzane Reatig just may be the best
least-known architect in Washington

By Benjamin Forgey, Page 9

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Perspectives

by Benjamin Forgey

Under the radar

*Architect Suzane Reatig is the best architect in D.C. you don't know.
Just look around Shaw.*



"Architecture is still being done ... and someday I will do it," Suzane Reatig swore to herself in the 1980s.

MOST OF THE buildings Suzane Reatig has designed are affordable residential units within walking distance of her office, a three-to-five person operation comfortably ensconced in a row house on Eighth Street NW, in the heart of the Shaw neighborhood. This concentration on social housing in one of the city's poorest, if fast-gentrifying, areas helps to explain Reatig's modest public profile.

Unlike, say, the 1920s in Europe or the 1930s in the United States, designing residences for poor people is not front and center on today's architectural agenda. And no longer does the effort carry any particular cachet among taste-making elites. Though she's respected within the profession, as a handsome number of design awards attest, Reatig remains the least-known

architect of certifiable excellence in the Washington region.

This does not mean, of course, that Reatig is not appreciated by the people who live in her buildings. Even if most would not recognize her name, all are beneficiaries of a long checklist of qualities she strives to provide – spacious interiors, extraordinary access to natural light, cross-ventilation, soundproof concrete construction, high ceilings and dramatic double-height living areas where possible.

With her proud, prickly, intense demeanor, Reatig can be quite fierce when talking about her work. At the end of a walking tour of a half dozen of her buildings in Shaw, she coolly concluded that her residences "really are much better than the luxury units they're building around Logan Circle, where »



Complex yet crisp

❶ 506 O St. NW: Architect Suzane Reatig calls this affordable duplex in Shaw “The See-Through House.” ❷ 442-444 N St. NW: Reatig’s Crisp modernist facades in a historic district in the 400 block of N Street NW open onto four spacious apartments. ❸ 626 S St. NW: This covered parking deck, hidden from the street, is evidence of Reatig’s inventive interpretations of the city’s zoning rules. ❹ 1713 Seventh St. NW: Most of Reatig’s affordable housing projects in Shaw have commodious exterior spaces, such as this outdoor “hallway” behind 1713 Seventh St. NW.

they just spend \$5,000 on kitchen materials but offer very little space and light and no cross-ventilation." On another occasion she stated, with matter-of-fact assurance, "Every one of the units I have designed, I'd be happy to live in."

Reatig is a refreshing anomaly. When looking at or thinking about her work, you get an eerie but unmistakable sense that she is a throwback to an earlier architectural age, that she might be designing social housing during modernism's heroic years, in 1920s Berlin, Vienna or Amsterdam. In their vastly influential 1932 book "The International Style," Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock praised a modern architecture of elegant, flat surfaces, open spaces, geometric purity and, as they wrote, "a truly classic restraint."

Reatig's buildings would fit right in. When, with rhetorical abandon, Austrian architect Adolf Loos pronounced that "ornament is crime," he could well have been describing any number of Reatig's austere buildings in Shaw (and elsewhere). "The plan is the generator," decreed Le Corbusier in "Towards a New Architecture," his vastly influential 1923 tome, and he may as well have been speaking directly to Reatig because inventive, tradition-defying floor plans are at the core of her art.

Less fancifully, one can imagine Reatig at work in Israel during the 1950s, '60s or '70s, where she grew up surrounded by Bauhaus-influenced buildings and where, not incidentally, she was trained in the exacting, engineering-heavy architecture curriculum of the Technion in Haifa, "Israel's MIT."

Reatig had a difficult time getting started in her chosen profession when she emigrated to the Washington area, shortly after her graduation in 1975. She worked as a carpenter in Rockville during the recession of the mid-'70s before landing a lowly job with a suburban architecture firm, and then another, and then another, until finally breaking free to form her own company in 1989. Even during these hard times (made harder by the fact of being a single-mom in a then male-dominated profession), Reatig does not seem to have exhausted an ample supply of true grit.

The firms she worked for, she recalls, "made buildings and made money but they weren't doing architecture." Her ambition, the theme that got her through, was that "architecture is still being done, if not in this place, and someday I will do it."

Reatig's first important commission, back in the early 1990s, was a stunner. She was chosen to design a new worship hall for the Metropolitan Community Church, a growing congregation serving primarily gay, lesbian and transgender parishioners. How she got that job as a totally unknown, unproven architect is a story of dogged perseverance coupled with an uncanny ability to recognize opportunity where others only see obstacles.

The congregation was being told that, because of official parking requirements, the 10,000-square-foot lot in Shaw, on the southeast corner of Fifth and Ridge streets, was way too small for an auditorium seating 300 people. Reatig noted, however, that the regulation was for fixed seats. By switching to movable chairs, and by otherwise inventively interpreting the city's rules, Reatig proved it could be done.

And then, on a bare bones budget, she did it. There may be a bit of awkwardness in the design of the masonry-sheathed administrative portion of the building, but all is forgiven in the sanctuary, which is a magical cube where changing conditions of natural light play on the consciousness day and night. With a

vaulted metal roof supported by a sequence of bowstring trusses, and expansive primary walls of sheer glass, this high, simple room became from the day it opened in 1993 one of the city's more breathtaking holy spaces.

Reatig's affordable housing projects are not breathtaking, at least superficially. The architect works with what she is given, and at first glance the results can be dry enough to pucker the lips. But every one of her buildings has been rigorously thought through, from plan to section to elevation, so that they all deserve careful study. The narrow lot at 626 S St. NW, for instance, was zoned for two conventional row houses, but, using the entire depth of the lot, Reatig was able to fit in five spacious units (including two really neat loft apartments), along with sheltered off-street parking, an airy open courtyard and a street-facing store. All this is disguised, almost, by the no-nonsense metal, glass and gray masonry frontage.

Reatig has performed similar feats all over Shaw. At 442-444 N St. NW, she arranged four big units and a courtyard behind two

Reatig is a refreshing anomaly. When looking at or thinking about her work, one gets an eerie but unmistakable sense that she is a throwback to an earlier architectural age, that she might be designing social housing during modernism's heroic years, in 1920s Berlin, Vienna or Amsterdam.

row house facades, one of which is a partial historic remnant, the other a crisp modernist composition of metal, large windows and glass block. The slightly asymmetrical simplicity of the five-story facade at 1713 Seventh St. NW – two glass curtain wall bays balanced against planes of plain-Jane concrete-block – belies the splendid complexity of the project, which includes assisted living units, family residences, a large community room, a spacious courtyard and street-facing stores. Reatig's ability to combine unconventional floor plans with surprising three-dimensional results produces a sort of formalist apogee in the little building at the corner of Fifth and O streets NW, a duplex whose interior stairwells crisscross behind a wonderful wall of glass. She's given it an apt nickname: "The See-Through House."

By focussing on Reatig's residential projects in Shaw I may have done her other work an injustice. She has done a variety of things, including the church, of course, a transit station in Montgomery County, a few single-family homes and house additions, for-profit apartment buildings, and a couple of terrific freestanding artists' studios. All share her precise, finely honed, almost mathematical rationalism.

Still, if I could have one wish granted for this architect in her 61st year, it would be to supply her with a few new clients who have adventurous spirits and interesting, nonresidential projects in mind. Bishop C.M. Bailey of the United House of Prayer for All People, the resolute organization behind almost all of Reatig's endeavors in Shaw, has succinctly summed up her contribution: "We are the better for her services." Amen to that. @

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House of Prayer/House of Style

In DC, a Black church sees modern design as its ministry

5/13/2009

Eric Easter

Washington DC's Shaw neighborhood has the odd distinction of being both the fastest and slowest case of gentrification in the city. As some Shaw residents are fond of saying, it's been "rapidly gentrifying" for the last thirty years. That's because the changes have not been block by block, but rather house by house, alley by alley, neighbor by neighbor, brick by brick.

In some places, the difference between a good neighborhood and a questionable one is the distance between one end of the same block and the other.

Even as elegant turn of the century three and four story brownstones return to their glory, neighbors on listservs argue about public housing, prostitution, car thefts, gang activity, late night bursts of gunfire and -- contemporary home design.

At first glance (and second, and third) the corner of 5th & O seems like an odd place for a big glass house with a Japanese-inspired rock garden, and picture windows that make the structure nearly see-through. Maybe it's the row of ornate rowhouses that make it seem so out of place. Or maybe it's the police roadblock that checks IDs at 6th&O on Friday nights. Or else the surveillance camera sits atop a former school at 4th & O. Then again, maybe it's the 5 N'O gang graffiti on several walls in walking distance.

Whatever the reason, it's hard to envision feeling entirely comfortable being so open in such an environment.

Nevertheless, it's placement is striking, and in the right combinations of light and shadow, beautiful in a minimalist sort of way.

Equally striking is the patron that developed the project - the United House of Prayer for All People(UHOP) led by Bishop S.C. "Sweet Daddy" Madison. Known in the area simply as The House of Prayer, it is a congregation its elders admit is steeped in myth and secrecy, but that has in recent years taken a very visible and aggressive approach to shaping its surroundings.

According to Bishop Madison, who responded via e-mail, there's a Godly mission behind the developments. "Those that only know the House of Prayer from popular myth never saw it as changing the lives of those that represented the least among us. What UHOP has erected in real property over the past several years has had more impact in the community than the words we have spoken over the past 80 years."

According to the project's architect, Suzane Reatig, "Shaw in particular has been witness to crime for years. By building open and inviting buildings we are taking an active role in improving the neighborhood and presenting a new image to the community. When you design a building to look like a fortress...it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our goal is to challenge this tendency in urban design."

Not everyone in the neighborhood sees it that way, either in the project at 5th & O, or similar ones in the area built by UHOP. Many homeowners in the area spent years lobbying DC's Historic Preservation Review

Board for historic status, finally awarded in 2000. Likewise, most assumed that the designation would preserve the historic look and feel that drew them to the neighborhood, only to find that historic preservation covers existing structures only. In fact, the HPRB actively encourages modern design in new construction, assuming that, someday, it might also be considered important for its time.

If UHOP and Reatig achieve their goal of using design to shift attitudes and behaviors in a crime-plagued area, its importance is guaranteed.

<http://www.ebonymagazine.com/culture/design/index.aspx?id=12972>

ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITECTURE VIEW/Herbert Muschamp

A Sanctuary, Yes, but This Is Not a Place to Hide

ARCHES SOARING INTO DIM IN-finitude, hazy light filtered through colored glass or clouds of incense, walls inscribed with arcane symbols: in the secular imagination, religion is often depicted as an architecture of obscurity, as if to evoke a formless world that lies beyond reason or the grave.

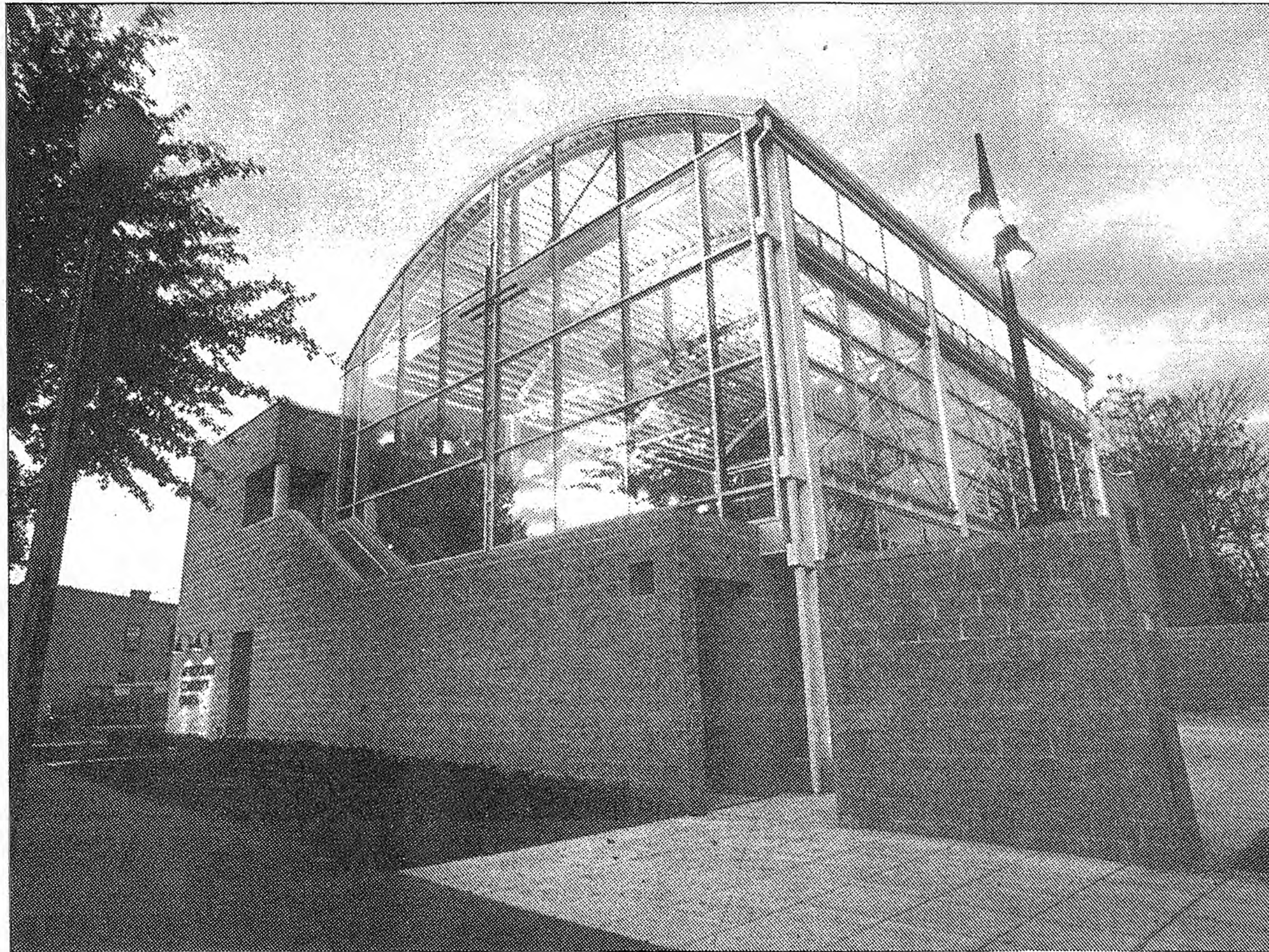
The Metropolitan Community Church, a striking new building in Washington, honors a different idea: that a religion makes it possible to see things with the utmost clarity. This nondenominational house of worship, which was dedicated in March, ushers its congregation and guests into a realm of literal and metaphoric transparency: a place where space, structure and function have been rendered into lucid, accessible form.

Social as well as theological convictions have helped to shape this design, for the Metropolitan Community Church has staked its identity to an ideal of openness. The congregation, predominantly lesbians and gay men, is linked not only by religious faith but by belief in the value of being visibly who you are. Many of its members have struggled against social pressures to withdraw behind a mask — versions of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” military policy hammered out in this city earlier this year. The church they’ve built for themselves may be a sanctuary, but it is not a place to hide.

Even the decision to create a new building was a kind of coming out — since its founding in 1970, the Washington branch of the Metropolitan Community Church has met in borrowed quarters or in buildings designed for other purposes — and it took more than one act of faith to realize it. How does a congregation of 500 people raise \$1.2 million for architecture? It sells bonds and prays.

Then there was community tension to contend with. In Washington, as in many other American cities, gay people have been in the vanguard of neighborhood gentrification. While some residents of Shaw, the low-income north Washington neighborhood where the church is located, welcomed it as a community anchor, the pastor, Larry Uhrig, and associate pastor, Candice Shults, worked hard to build trust with those who feared that they would be displaced by an upscale invasion.

But the church took its most breathtaking leap of faith when it hired its architect, Suzane Reatig. Israeli-born, a woman who describes herself as not particularly religious, Ms. Reatig had never received a solo



Michael Geissinger for The New York Times

Metropolitan Community Church in Washington— No frills, no pretensions, just the simple art of building well.

commission before. But while she didn’t have a body of work to recommend her to the church’s building committee, she impressed them with her determination. And her esthetic convictions paralleled the church’s social mission. After toiling for years on residential projects where she was often called upon to gussy things up with period styles, Ms. Reatig yearned to make an honest building. No frills, no pretensions, just the simple art of building well.

Together, architect and client have produced a prodigy of the Washington cityscape, a building that recalls Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial in its enlargement of emotional

impact through a reduction of formal means. The church’s main space, a 300-seat sanctuary, is the antithesis of Lin’s sunken black chevron: a glass-walled cube of light, the sanctuary rises two and a half stories to a barrel vault of white painted steel.

YET THE ROOM RESEMBLES Lin’s design in its power to lure the mind beyond its finite physical dimensions. During daylight hours, the eye is drawn past the altar, beyond the glass wall (and the simple wooden cross framed by its mullions), over treetops, to the sky. At night, the glass turns

reflective, doubling the sanctuary’s modest volume into an illusion of deep space.

The transparency of the design is further amplified by the exposed structure: the steel bowstring trusses that support the ceiling; the cross-bracing of the windows; the spare walls of rough-textured, “split face” concrete block in a shade of dusty mauve. And it extends to the clarity with which the building’s envelope conveys the organizational hierarchy within. Supporting functions — offices, lobbies, a library — are wrapped around the sanctuary in a two-story, L-shaped configuration, enclosed within walls of concrete block that stand out against the

A new church in Washington for lesbians and gay men reflects the congregation’s belief in the value of being visibly who you are.

sanctuary’s shimmering glass expanse.

This organizational division has also enabled Ms. Reatig to adjust the building to its urban context. While the vaulted sanctuary assumes a landmark presence along the broad frontage of Fifth Street, the service wing holds the scale of the residential buildings on the adjacent side street. The church wants to be a good neighbor but not an invisible one. At night, the sanctuary glows brightly against the sky — and against the stereotypical view that gay life after dark is an X-rated disco marathon.

Death is a vital presence here. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, religious buildings were often raised in response to plague. The Metropolitan Community Church provides a focus for faith in the age of AIDS. Ms. Reatig speaks of being inspired by the Eastern view that death is the opposite not of life but of birth. That idea is implicit in the design of a small chapel on the church’s second floor. Rows of niches are punched into the rear wall of the chapel, forming a columbarium for funerary urns. The niches also overlook the sanctuary below, as if the dead were part of the congregation. The grid of hollow sockets reads like a statement of mission. Here, political struggle is absorbed into a spiritual ordeal.

The chapel is the one place in the building where Ms. Reatig uses colored glass: a single deep green window. Green is a color of life, but Ms. Reatig has chosen a spectral, bluish tint. Light pouring through the window stains the room an unearthly shade that brings to mind the tomb as well as springtime. The chapel may be the church’s true sanctuary. It speaks to a community that has been ravaged not only by loss but by survival. Friends get sick, they die; and life does not take a recess, nor does the plague abate. In this quiet grotto of a room, Ms. Reatig has made a place for sorting out feelings shattered almost beyond repair. It is a public space for private grief.

Labor of Love

*Metropolitan Community Church
Washington, D. C.
Suzane Reatig, Architect*



The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches has a hundred-year-old history of compassionate service. This recent church brims with openness, light, and hope, extending the MCC's tradition into the context of the 1990s and serving its mostly gay and lesbian congregation that draws its members from all over the Washington, D. C., region.

This church is the brainchild of a progressive board, two pastors (Larry Uhrig and Candace Shultis), and a persevering architect, Suzane Reatig, a young practitioner trained in Israel. Without her four-year commitment to the project, innovative methods for getting the most building out of restrictive zoning, and rigorous marketing, the structure might never have been built (see *Up Close*).

The ostensible program called for a sanctuary to accommodate a congregation of 300, with overflow space in a walled yard also used for staff parking. The real, if unwritten, program demanded a sanctuary that was open, congenial, acoustically suited for a highly music-oriented service, one that encouraged fellowship and recognized the nature of its members, whose AIDS-occasioned mortality rate has hovered like a pall over all its work and worship.

Limited by a \$1.2-million budget for 13,400 square feet of space, Reatig decided to eschew decoration and to use a spare vocabulary of steel, aluminum, and glass, with a counterpoint of light-red concrete block, to obtain an atmosphere of lightness, clarity, awareness of the passing sun (the main glass areas face west and south), and of the panorama of sky, clouds, trees, and flying birds in view from every seat. Four steel bowstring trusses 16 feet on center support a steel deck in the form of a shallow vault, which due to a clever use of glazing of different degrees of reflectivity, extends the appearance of the vault to twice its real length at certain times of the day (see photo, top right, page 81). But as a focus, a stretch of clear glass behind the altar spells out a cross, a simple but highly creative way of using technology for symbolic use.

Since all other ornament had to be derived from the materials themselves, connecting details were worked out with great care, especially at the points where the turnbuckle bracing connects with the steel support columns (Reatig had wanted costlier tube columns but had to settle for the cheaper flanged H-columns), and in the connections between steel structure and split-block masonry.

The plan itself (two stories and a basement, the maximum allowed by zoning) is a classic example of Louis Kahn's served-and-service spaces, with an L-shaped server-space of offices, library, and circulation functions embracing the nearly square sanctuary.

It is only in the heavy-set street-level entrance that Reatig's sure touch with materials stumbles. The shallow archway spanning the curved exterior elevator shaft is awkward, and the entrance is mean. In truth, on a warm sunny day, the side doors on the stone-block-paved parking side are thrown open as a grand welcoming gesture.

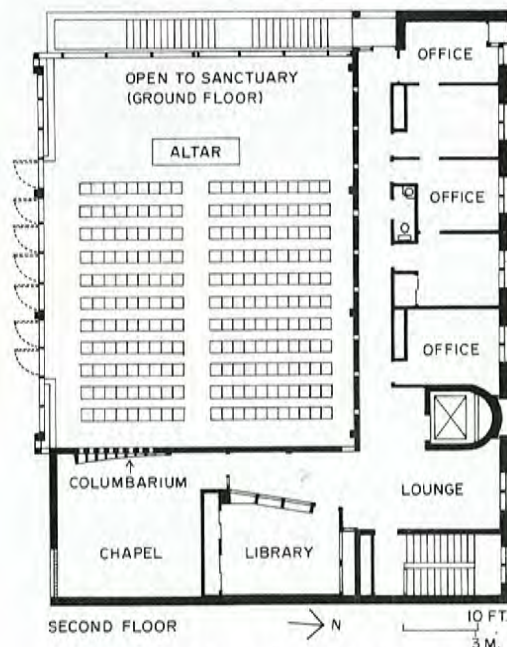
The building is a hit with the congregation, architects, and students. A group of visiting students told Reatig that this was "the first modern building in Washington." Because of the play of light, one member says that "every time I come to the church, it's like I saw it for the first time." And best of all, a worshipper told Reatig on the day of dedication: "Thank you. This building is us."

Stephen A. Kliment

© Robert Lautman photos



MCC is sited in a tree-lined residential neighborhood near downtown Washington (top). The principal entrance (above) is split-face unit masonry. The upper-level plan (below) shows a Kahn-inspired scheme of server-and-served spaces, with server spaces in the L embracing the almost square 300-seat sanctuary. A row of doors on the south side of the sanctuary leads to a small parking lot paved with 3-inch-square blocks separated by thin grass strips, used on clear days as an extension of the sanctuary.





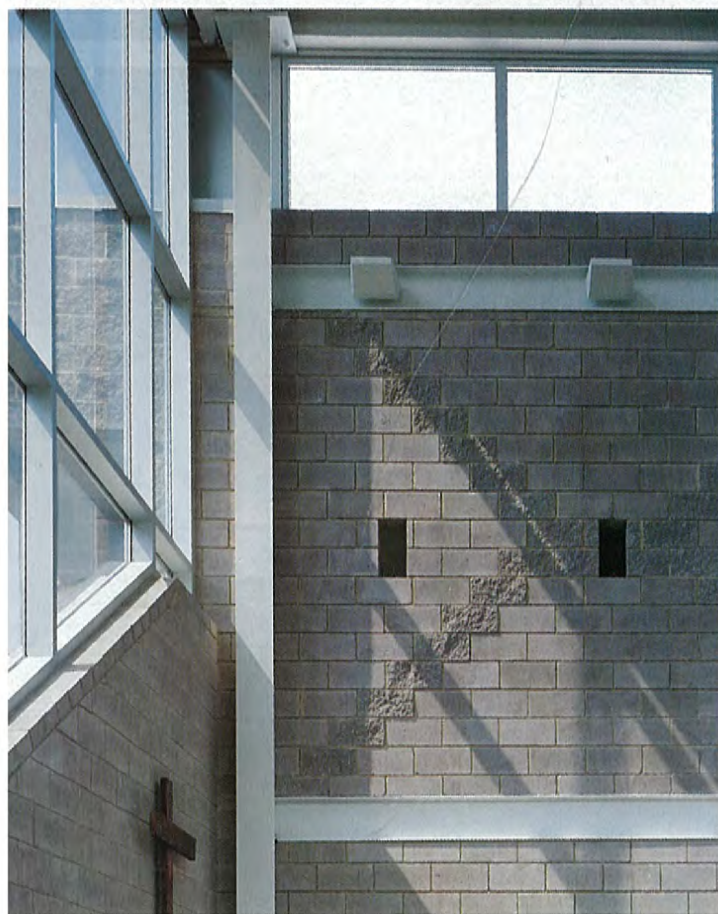
Up Close

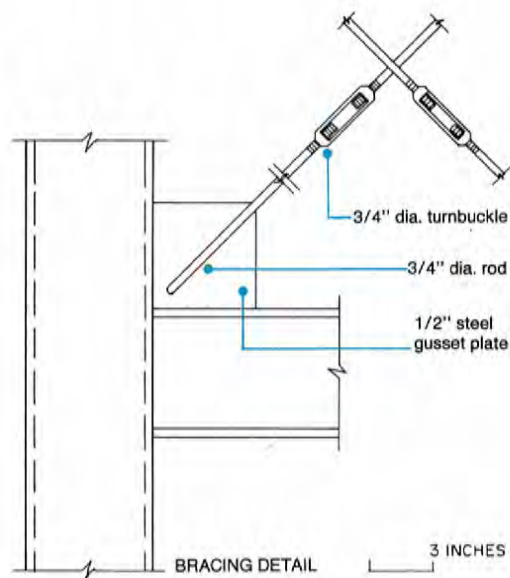
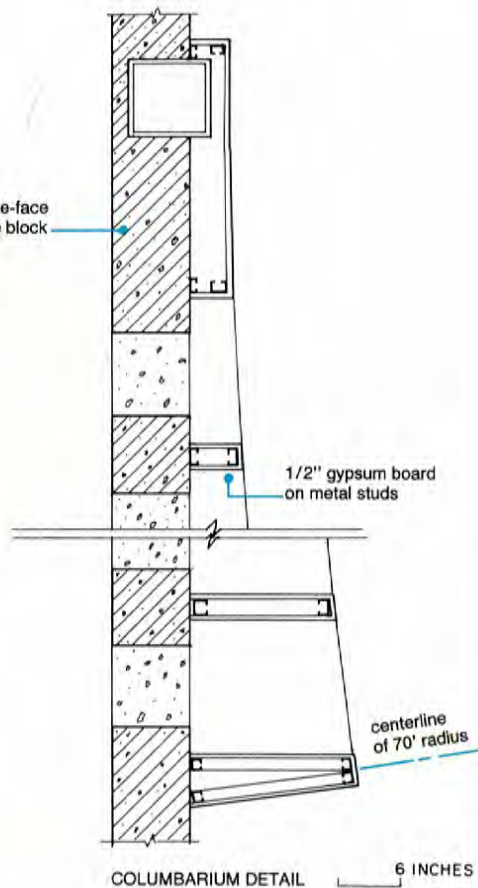
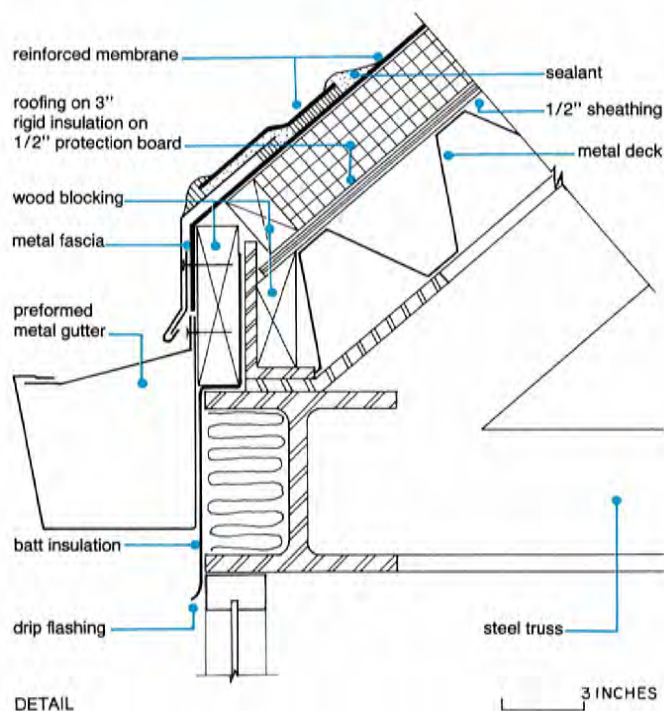
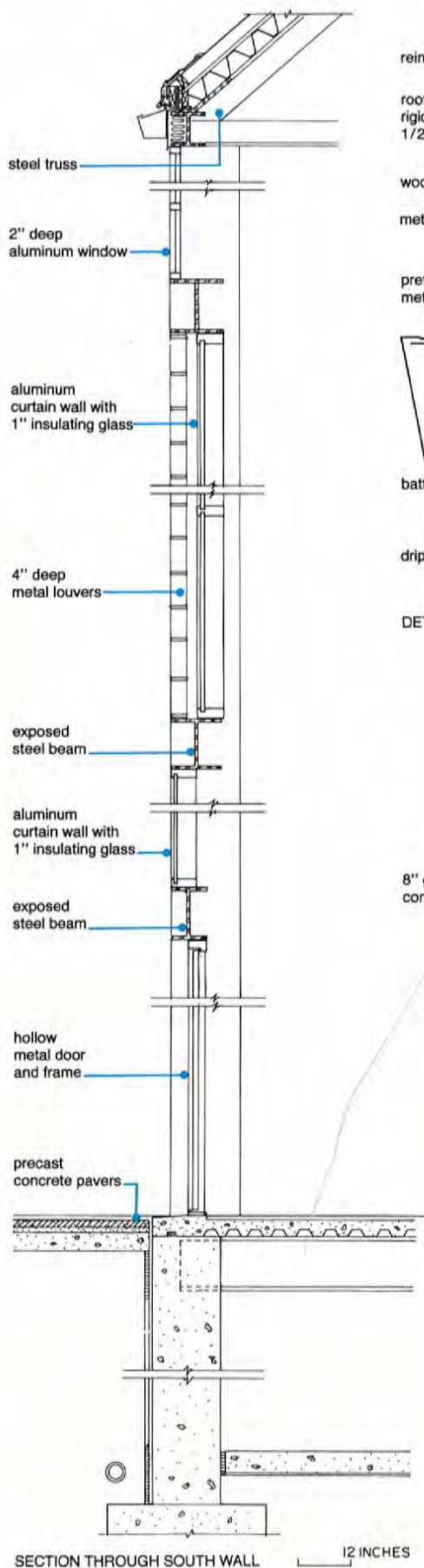
From vision to occupancy. Architect Reatig, who arrived from Israel in 1975 and worked for several architects around Washington, was introduced to MCC's selection committee by an associate who was a member. As the committee already had four proposals, and Reatig had never done even a multiple assembly building let alone a place of worship, she was an unlikely choice. She did, however, have unconventional ideas, chemistry, and enthusiasm. Yet, even after her selection, it wasn't all smooth sailing. Pastor Uhrig had very traditional ideas of what a church should be—a dark space that allowed control through lighting, stained glass to add atmosphere, and a formal seating arrangement with a nave leading to a raised altar. Reatig was able to overcome these preconceptions and carry out her vision. MCC received added value from Reatig's services. For example, by convincing the building department that the cars-to-seats ratio should be calculated on the basis of actual seating area, not total area, parking was reduced to 15 spaces from 30, which would have eaten up half the site. She spent over half her fee on daily field visits to make on-site decisions about such details as floor-tile patterns and placement of cabling to preserve the pristine design.



Light pours into the glassed-in sanctuary during a service (opposite). Lighting varies dramatically at different times of the day (right). The columbarium (above) opens out over the sanctuary, a deliberate gesture, as Reatig puts it, to have deceased members of the congregation take part in services.







The structural system consists of 40-foot bowstring trusses 16 feet on center, resting on wide-flange columns. The enclosure is a glass and aluminum curtain wall, with glazing in various degrees of reflectivity. The turnbuckle cross-bracing is echoed across the hall by a high-relief pattern of split block (opposite, bottom left). Lighting is a system of uplighting at the perimeter and downlights attached to the bottom chords of trusses. Sound is amplified, but a rather high reverberation time favors music over speech. The columbarium is built on a curve to accommodate varying sized urns (detail, left).

Credits

Owner: The Metropolitan Community Church of Washington, D. C.

Architect: Suzane Reatig Architecture

Engineer: McMullan & Associates (structural), Setty & Associates (mechanical), Macris, Hendricks P. A. (civil)

Consultant: Melinda Morison, lighting

General Contractor: Harvey Construction Company