

# PCN Metropolitan Philadelphia

## FOCUS ON RELIGIOUS STRUCTURES

### DWKCB: The art of church architecture

*Kelly Harrington / Reporter*

For architect P. Michael O'Rourke, designing churches can elevate the intrinsically artistic nature of architecture.

"Architecture is an art form, and one of the more expressive forms of architecture can be seen in the design of a church," O'Rourke said.

O'Rourke is an associate with Diseroad, Wolff, Kelly, Clough, Bucher Inc. Architects (DWKCB) in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, and specializes in religious architecture.

"I [have] found the structural design of churches to be very interesting, challenging and expressive," O'Rourke said.

#### A career is born

O'Rourke entered the religious structure design field because of his background. He has been a churchgoer all of his life and sees his work as another form of worship and prayer. He worked on his first church with one of the partners of DWKCB, Fred Diseroad. The project consisted of the redesign of Diseroad's own parish. Out of this experience a career focus was born, although O'Rourke does designs for many other kinds of structures.

"I found I really enjoyed this project," O'Rourke said. "I liked the expressive creativity that is required to design a

church. I liked the fact that often high quality and unusual materials are used in churches and that the sacred spaces require a high level of design refinement."

#### Designing with a lot in mind

With each project, O'Rourke strives for something unique while still adhering to the structures of tradition and the wishes of his clients. In designing a Catholic church, for example, O'Rourke says he starts with a book that guides the design goals of new and ren-

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The St. Basil Roman Catholic Church project O'Rourke worked on in East Pikeland, Pennsylvania. Courtesy of DWKCB

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Michael O'Rourke

Courtesy of DWKCB

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ovated churches called *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*.

"We also work closely with each parish to customize their facility and, at the same time, conform to the guidelines of the church," O'Rourke said. "We begin by designing the new church to work with the site and the local context. Our goal is always to create a design that is unique to each church client."

O'Rourke familiarizes himself with the history of each parish before going to the boards with his ideas. He stresses there is much to consider when designing a religious structure.

"A church needs to be as perfect a building as possible, utilizing high quality and sometimes expensive materials and systems," O'Rourke said. "The architecture and liturgical arrangement must also reflect the religious rites celebrated there and express the beliefs and teachings of the church with clarity."

One of O'Rourke's biggest challenges is how to make churches affordable and to meet these goals. Wanting high-end materials and elaborate themes is not always feasible for churches, which are largely funded by parishioners.

According to O'Rourke, there is always a lot of give and take when it comes to the ideas,

the design and the actual construction. He works with the clergy to come up with a plan and budget, and seeks out material providers and contractors who can help meet that.

**Real-life experience**

On the St. Basil Roman Catholic Church project in East Pikeland, Pennsylvania, O'Rourke collaborated closely with the priest, Robert McLaughlin. The two designed the church around a collection of antique windows McLaughlin purchased before his former church was closed.

"The church has a bit of a Byzantine feel to it, albeit interpreted in a contemporary way," O'Rourke said. "Father McLaughlin has an eye for art. He commissioned a gifted sculptor, who happened to be a parishioner, to design the altar frontal and backdrop wall of the sanctuary. An icon artist was commissioned to paint icons of several saint and angel images that flank the tabernacle in the daily mass chapel."

The major architectural feature, in addition to the stained glass, was a large clerestory located over the sanctuary which provides natural light into the space.

O'Rourke recently completed the St. Elizabeth Church in Upper Uwchlan, Pennsylvania. It presented him with an opportunity to think about the master plan for the future build-out of the facility.

"The first phase of this master plan was a new church and a new school with associated parking. Future phases including a parish office building [and] a rectory, and a gym addition to the school will complete the parish's plan," O'Rourke said.

His collaborations on this project were a bit different than those of St. Basil. He talked with a very large building committee organized into several subcommittees, including a



The exterior stone is also exposed behind the pulpit, providing continuity in design. Courtesy of DWKCB

church design group, a school design group and a site planning group.

The church was designed to seat approximately 1,400 and also built to include a daily mass chapel and large narthex and baptistery. According to O'Rourke, the major unique architectural feature was a layered, laminated roof structure. The roof has cantilevered eaves and is separated from the base of the building by glass banding, giving the appearance that the roof is floating.

The major liturgical pieces, including the altar, ambo, presider chair, tabernacle pedestal and baptistery, were built with alternating stacked

layers of marble and wood. O'Rourke noted that the inspiration for this stacked-layer concept came from sculptures created by the famous artist Constantin Brancusi.

O'Rourke is very happy about where he is right now in his career. He enjoys working with the many artisans and liturgical equipment suppliers who

are involved in church work, as well as with the clergy and parishioners.

"I've been involved in the church all my life," O'Rourke said, "and I appreciate the experience and responsibility of being able to express the church's teachings in the design of its religious architecture."

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The Mary Mother of the Redeemer Church in North Wales, Pennsylvania. The interior uses natural light to reflect the beauty of the stained glass. Courtesy of DWKCB