
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 13-04

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church

Square 2646, Lot 807
4300 16th Street NW

Meeting Date: May 23, 2013
Applicant: Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Affected ANC: 4A
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4300 16th Street NW, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1926 to 1956, covering the period of construction of the church to the completion of its parish house.

The property clearly meets District of Columbia Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) and National Register Criterion C for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types... or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation,” and it possesses “high artistic values.” In this case, it is a splendid example of a neo-Gothic church. The property also meets D.C. Criterion B (“History”) and National Register Criterion A for its association with the “national church movement” in Washington.

Background

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church was established in 1876, when American-born members of Trinity German Lutheran Church founded their own English-speaking congregation and shifted affiliation from the Missouri Synod to the Ohio Synod. Grace Church was an important mission church in this area, helping establish at least three additional congregations in the next half century. In 1924, the Ohio Synod endorsed the idea of a new edifice for Grace Church to serve as the denomination’s “representative” church in the national capital.

To that end, other congregations contributed money to the construction, which commenced in 1926. The building was designed by Rochester native J.W.C. Corbusier, a Beaux-Arts-trained church architect who had a number of commissions under his belt, having worked in several states and even designed several buildings for the Ohio Synod. Corbusier had been influenced not only by his studies of cathedrals and churches in France, but by association with Henry Vaughan and Ralph Adams Cram, the foremost practitioners of the neo-Gothic in America at the turn of the twentieth century.

This late flowering of the Gothic derived from a mid-nineteenth-century revival in England, where there was renewed interest in traditional Christianity and in High-Church Anglicanism and

even Catholicism. The popularity of the style spread to the United States and supplanted the classicism that had itself replaced the original Gothic. It thus became acceptable for Protestant denominations to employ a mode of architecture that had been associated with the Catholic Church. In proper Protestant fashion, however, the overall forms were adopted but often pared down relative to Catholic churches in terms of applied decoration. This can be said for the random-ashlar Grace Church and its sympathetic 1955-1956 parish house addition.

Evaluation

Unless closely associated with important events or figures, it is difficult to compare houses of worship except by their architecture. It is typically a fruitless effort to try to compare denominations themselves. Simply put, Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church is an impressive and beautiful building, which justifies its designation under the criteria for architecture and design especially as applied to religious building types.

Erected 1926 to 1928, the load-bearing stonemasonry, basilica form, and tower all testify to the importance of the sanctuary, intended to serve as the “representative” church of the Ohio Synod’s practice of Lutheranism. It was no accident that the building was sited along 16th Street, Washington’s “Avenue of Churches.” Despite Lutheranism’s early split from the Catholic Church and its de-emphasis of the works of man in favor of personal salvation by the grace of God’s word, there is no mistaking the material aspects of this house of worship. Indeed, the fundraising pleas make manifest a practical side to the appearance of the planned church:

But... a [small, poor] church... is never going to win the unchurched or even hold our in-coming Lutherans in the church.... By thousands, our people visit Washington. If they find their church there a thing to be ashamed of there is no estimating the loss of enthusiasm occasioned. “I guess the Lutheran Church isn’t much after all. Why should I waste my time and money on such an unpromising organization?”.... To give our church a good name – to make her an influence for good in a city whose influence is both nation-wide and world-wide – what more important phase of church work is there for any synodical body than that!

At the time, the established churches were clearly much in competition with each other for members. Immigration certainly brought more Lutherans to America, but it was disproportionately bringing Catholics and Jews from southern and eastern Europe. World War I probably drove people to religion as much as it drove others from it. Increasingly popular political ideologies, such as socialism, were generally antagonistic to religion. But new sects, such as Christian Science, were increasingly popular in the heartland, and there was considerable evangelical revivalism as well.

It says a great deal about the increasingly dominant place of the nation’s capital in the American imagination that this secular center was becoming a religious center, too. In addition to serving a local congregation, a “national” church was a public-relations symbol and a lobby both for moral issues and issues that would more narrowly affect a particular sect. A branch in Washington did not have to serve as the principal symbol of a church, of course, but it was common enough that churches felt they had to establish a visible presence in the capital. It is difficult to assess the ultimate influence of the concentration of so many “national” churches, a phenomenon that was, at once, nationwide and uniquely local, but its architectural impact on this city is obvious.