St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Catholic Church

5500 Paris Avenue

The New Orleans architectural firm of Curtis & Davis was rightly proud of this church. Designed in 1963, the tenth anniversary of the parish, it was an early example in the city of a new trend in religious architecture: a circular, amphitheater design that brings all members of the congregation closer to the altar than did the traditional elongated rectangular nave.

This square building was subdivided by three barrel vaults supported by ribs. The architects chose the barrel vaults because parishioners remembered fondly the round-roofed Quonset hut that served as the first church. Two vaults sheltered the entrances while the third led to the baptistery. All three floated above the fiberglass roof without resting on it. The core of the building was of reinforced concrete, and hidden within the ribs were air-conditioning ducts.

Using simple materials, the form generated the excitement. The central spire rose 80 feet inside (135 feet outside), adding to an open feeling, and the gold leaf interior of the spire reflected light, as did the white terrazzo floor. The reredos was made of iron, brass, and mahogany interlocking crosses, while similar crosses decorated the exterior. Four graceful concrete arcs, with their bases on each side of the altar, met at the foot of the spire, creating the impression of a tent sheltering the altar.

Above the gold-veined white Carrara marble altar a carved wooden Ascending Christ seemed to float weightlessly.

Nonfigurative colored glass windows, produced by a studio in Chartres, France, followed guidelines supplied by the architects. The windows lining the barrel vaults added to the airiness of the church, and at the ends of the vaults were semi-circular windows with the themes of the Dove, the Trinity, and the Ten Commandments.

The baptistery, although a separate room, was clearly an integral part of the church when seen from the chancel. The architects designed the baptistery railing, with its fish design, and the font was of Carrara marble.

Hurricane Katrina treated St. Frances Cabrini Church cruelly. Holy Cross School had also suffered at the hands of Katrina and bought the Cabrini school and church from the archdiocese. Despite opposition from parishioners and preservationists, Holy Cross razed the remaining structures and built an imposing new campus on the site.

The lovely crucifix with the Resurrected Christ from Cabrini has been installed at Transfiguration of the Lord Church (the former St. Raphael the Archangel Church) at Prentiss and Elysian Fields avenues.

*Not visited on Stained Glass Art in Sacred Places tours.*

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