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Interweaving the Two Worlds — Jonathan Nesci's *100 Variations*:

An Ode to Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church

by David M. Versluis

Church Architecture as Liturgy and Theology

Church architecture can proclaim the redemptive power of God. Just as the Tabernacle was designed to remind ancient Israel of the mighty acts of God, church architecture today can signify the gift of life and remind us of God's blessing and covenantal grace. In this paper, I will detail how Eliel Saarinen used principles of modern architecture to design a church that could best serve Christian worship. This investigation will lead to a reflection on how the contemporary artist/designer Jonathan Nesci responded perceptively to the nuances of Saarinen's work in designing an installation that metaphorically alludes to the past, present, and future.

The October 1942 issue of *Architectural Forum* published an article about the Tabernacle Church of Christ in Columbus, Indiana. This remarkable building still stands as a classic example of modern American church architecture. The principal architect was the renowned modernist architect Eliel Saarinen, who collaborated with his son Eero. This quotation from the *Forum* addresses the same issues as CIVA's 2015 conference theme, "Between Two Worlds: Contemporary Art and the Church," and may be encouraging to artists who find themselves caught between two worlds:

More than any other building type, and for reasons that require no elaboration, the church has resisted the encroachments of modern design. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that the question asked most frequently during the designing of this church was, "Why is this church so different in design from any other that I have seen?" Nor is it a particularly flattering commentary on the state of architectural appreciation at the present time that a straightforward solution to an honestly presented program should require involved explanations. But if it is not flattering, neither is it discouraging, for one of the most hopeful indications of contemporary approach to design is the widespread interest it invariably arouses.¹

The Tabernacle Church of Christ (now called First Christian Church) was the first modern building in Columbus, Indiana and one of the first contemporary church building designs in North America. Its geometric simplicity suggests a unity in overall form. Drawing from early Christian Italian church architecture, the rectangular box containing the sanctuary and the soaring campanile structure are characterized by incisive lines, classic proportions, minimal ornament, and harmonious rhythm and repetition. Comprising a full city block, the facility is composed of three rectangular wings surrounding a sunken garden. The layout of First Christian Church takes cues from earlier models of Saarinen's Finnish countrymen Alvar Aalto and Erik Bryggmann. The Saarinens imbued the rational, linear form with the tactile material warmth of buff stone panels and tan brick.²

Glorifying God with Light, Space and Sound

As human beings, communal spaces—particularly worship spaces—can profoundly shape us as we design spaces and furnishings to fit our current needs, capacities, and values.³ Saarinen was chosen as principal architect for The Tabernacle Church of Christ because of this conviction. To answer the congregation's anticipated question, "Is this design particularly appropriate to our church?" Saarinen said, "As this church has been based on the fundamentals of Christianity, so the new architectural thought is endeavoring to build upon the fundamental principles of architecture."⁴ Saarinen's design was unusual for its time and is considered to be the first church building constructed purely on "modern" design principles.

The project began in the late 1930s. The congregation originally considered a Neo-Gothic style. J. Irwin Miller, then a recent college graduate who had shadowed well-known architects as a student at Yale University, heard these conversations and said: "I don't see why you talk about a

Gothic Church or an Early American church—we are not Gothic or Early American.”⁵ His comment changed the discussion and led to Saarinen’s commissioning in 1939.

Two prominent members of the congregation, Elsie Irwin Sweeney and her sister Nettie Irwin Sweeney Miller began the process with a visit to Saarinen at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Elsie Irwin Sweeney later recalled details of the initial meeting:

Mr. Saarinen walked in. A very modest, unassuming man, rather short in stature and taciturn [sic] [taciturn]. He seemed timid and somewhat unfamiliar with our language. Since he had nothing to say, my sister opened the conversation with, “Have you ever built a church? He said ‘Yes’. — “Where?” “In Lithuania.” “Have you built any church in America?” “No. Because they are too theatrical — they are not my idea of religion.” My sister replied, “We don’t want that kind of a church.” For the first time, there was a sparkle in the eye of Mr. Saarinen and he asked her “What kind of church do you want?” As my sister had thought long on the subject, she was able to give an excellent reply. The answer was, “Our town is small and there are all sorts and conditions of men. While we should like the church to be beautiful, we do not want the first reaction to be, ‘how much did the church cost?’ We want the poorest women in town to feel at home there and able to worship her God in those surroundings.” Also she wanted the church to be so reverential that the smallest boy would know that it is the house of God and would keep still. Her third request was that it should be as timeless as the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.⁶

The conversation delighted Saarinen who then agreed to design their church. Church members and the architect had several conversations centered around questions such as, “What do we believe?” and “How will that be revealed in our church’s architecture?”⁷

Working with the building committee, the Saarinens came up with a set of design principles to symbolically represent and physically promote ideals such as the inter-relatedness of congregational worship, preaching, and the sacraments; and the integration of church education, administrative offices and common spaces. They believed that modern architecture would give the most straightforward and cohesive design for addressing these questions. To guide them, the building committee issued a brief articulating their vision:

We attach much importance to our effort to preach and to practice primitive Christianity and nothing else, for we believe that in it lies the hope of the world... There are a few elements in our belief that we would like to have emphasized in the church. Because the gospel of Christ’s

death, burial and Resurrection [meaning Baptism] lies at the heart of our faith, we would like it illustrated in some way in the architecture of the building... We are asking you to build a church which will interpret the spirit of Christ and of the gospel and which will also promote these ideals and assure their perpetuation among us... We believe that we must keep the difficult way of life that Christ preached before our eyes in the uncompromising and beautiful manner in which He presented it. We are confronted with this ideal in our communion service and in our sermons, but every other part of worship and work should be planned to remind us continually and impressively of the obligation and privilege of a Christian life in this world...

...We are all very sensitive to our surroundings, and to participate in a communion service in a place designed to interpret the meaning of that service is to help tremendously in accomplishing in individuals the purposes for which the Lord's Supper was established. The same applies to music and to all other phases of our study, work and worship.⁸

Theological Architecture

In their 1965 book *Christ and Architecture*, Donald Bruggink and Carl Droppers write, "How does Christ communicate with his people? The answer of the Church of Jesus Christ reformed according to the Word of God is that Christ communicates himself to his Church through Word and Sacrament! This is the message Luther and Calvin found in God's Word; this remains the position of those churches which are reformed according to his Word. God communicates himself through Word and Sacrament."⁹ Saarinen foreshadowed the import of *Christ and Architecture* and believed that a church's architecture should reflect its theology. The central question as he developed plans for First Christian Church was, "How does Christ communicate himself to his people and how can it be expressed architecturally?" Saarinen's design for First Christian Church acknowledges that Christ communicates himself through the Word (biblical preaching) and the Sacraments (communion and baptism). He expressed this in the way the chancel with the off-centered communion table and the baptismal pool in the back (the gate of which opens when in use) combine to create a sense of balance and unity with the pulpit (the Word) on the left.

For Saarinen, "architecture becomes churchly by providing an atmosphere of meditation, and this is achieved largely through color and proportion."¹⁰ All of Saarinen's buildings are characterized

by “honest” use of materials. In the case of First Christian Church, honesty is expressed through the design of the acoustics, the use of natural light, and the masterly use of proportions. Saarinen did not try to hide the common materials he used. Wood, glass, brick, stone, and concrete, all work together to form a worship space that conveys simplicity, dignity, and tranquility.

Bruggink and Droppers suggest that the noblest examples of a church building should be viewed as “theological architecture,” architecture that accurately balances mind and substance. Theological architecture inspires through “its use of plan, shape, and materials,”¹¹ producing a building that visually communicates the biblical gospel of grace and hope in Christ. Theological architecture becomes proclamation when its physical presence projects a world that is implicitly meaningful. The best church architecture is sentient and values integrity and veracity. When love for neighbor inspires art and architectural design, it serves as a blessing to humankind. A congregation, the church building, and the furnishings can artistically work together as an act of liturgy and worship and reflect the body of Christ.

The finest (church) architecture throughout the centuries does not simply imitate the past. That’s why Saarinen proclaimed, “Any building designed ... must be expressive of the time of its construction, and of no other time.”¹² He goes on to explain, “the present time must have an expressive form of its own.”¹³ The search for architectural form that is fitting for its time and place must also be unpretentious. He states, “For honest [modest] our form ‘must’ be.”¹⁴ In his 1943 book, *The City*, Saarinen studied the artistic principles of ancient Egyptian, classical Greek, and medieval architecture. He cites the 1889 book, *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (‘City Planning According to Artistic Principles’) by Viennese architect Camillo Sitte which criticized pragmatic planning by noticing how old European towns (as well as the Greek Acropolis) developed “organically” over time in a more open and direct manner based on “the law of creative

expression”—they were more “social,” in other words, and not “chained by... [doctrinaire] sterile formality.”¹⁵ Saarinen usually avoided the use of a rigid grid system, suggesting that an “informal irregularity” was more human. While he used patterns of regularity in some instances, he advocated for contemporary architecture that was a “coherent organism.”¹⁶

Saarinen’s Asymmetrical Grid Conception

According to Columbus architect Nolan Bingham, what makes First Christian Church modern is its asymmetrical design:

Saarinen used shapes in various iterations throughout the building, almost like variations on a symphonic theme. The shapes are repeated in floor tiles and wood panels in the sanctuary. The sanctuary’s tall windows on the west side resemble the tower, while small panels within the windows recall the tower and the main building. Even the cross in the sanctuary is made of several rectangular pieces. Asymmetrical designs also stand out: the building’s north side is covered with rectangular panels, but the large cross on the building’s front is off-center... The front door also is off-center, more to the tower’s side. The tower’s clock is off-centered in the other direction, toward the church, as if the buildings were trying to move closer together.¹⁷

Saarinen considered proportion the “delightful harmony” of modern architecture and based his structures on the golden ratio. He would have affirmed the sentiment of Robert Bringhurst who wrote about proportion in page layout as “an interval in music. In a given context, some are consonant, others dissonant. Some are familiar; some are also inescapable, because of their presence in the structures of the natural as well as the man-made world. Some proportions also seem particularly linked to living things.”¹⁸ As we’ll see later in my discussion of Jonathan Nesci’s work, like Saarinen, Nesci designs his artifacts based on the golden ratio similar to the Renaissance structure which is “precisely measured and formed,” yet flexible, unconstrained.¹⁹

Saareninen advocated asymmetry as a method for creating active tension and coherent balance throughout the building's structure in his design proposal to the First Christian Church's building committee and congregation:

The middle aisle of the Nave is slightly off center toward the West. We have not been concerned in a symmetrical solution, believing that forced symmetry only creates artificial and sterile conditions. Really, in the case at hand, symmetry was bound to be artificial, for the function of this church, in particular the function of the Chancel, is asymmetrical to its nature. Our endeavor, therefore, has rather been to arrive at a good balance between the various features and points of interest of the room.

According to this asymmetrical balance conception, the only symbolic feature in the Church—the plain and non-ornamental cross—is off center at the back of the Chancel. The detached communion table, on the other hand, being the central feature of the service, occupies a place of prominence in the service and is located at the central axis of the middle aisle. Here, the spirit of symmetry is innate in the problem and, therefore, calls for a symmetrical solution.

The pulpit is off center, on the East. It has as its background the elaborately perforated organ screen. The organist's console is behind the pulpit, hidden from the congregation, but easily visible from the choir at the opposite side of the Chancel, and in adequate relation to the orchestra space beneath the organ.

The organ screen is designed of wood, perforated and light, and will constitute a good contrast with the plain coolness of the background wall of the Chancel. Another contrast is introduced here with the tapestry above the choir seats. This will bring the softness of textile and enlivenment of color into the composition.

On the whole, our endeavor has been to create a serene, spatial atmosphere in this Church. Such an effect can, to a great extent, be achieved by surface and color treatment of the walls and ceiling. Another important point in this respect is the amount, direction and quality of the outside light that flows into the room. As for this outside light, we have a dual scheme: first, to lighten the Nave with the soft western light while services are held during the morning hours; second, to bring into the Chancel an abundance of the bright morning light in order to focus the eyes and minds toward this spatial flow of light. Such an arrangement, we think will add a spiritual quality to the service.

In both the Church proper and the Chapel, the same arrangement of the Baptistry has been used. It is at the rear of the Chancel, screened from the audience when not in use and opened by swinging doors when in use. Because in the Church proper, an abundance of light flows from above upon those being baptized in the depth of the baptistry, we believe that death, burial, and resurrection will be adequately symbolized with natural arrangements and effects, rather than with artificial means.²⁰

After more than seventy years, the building is still apropos and meets the objectives of the original building committee. In a 2012 interview, Associate Pastor Al White commented, “the building’s design helps reinforce the church’s purpose, to bring people closer together and closer to God, connections that are reflected in the church’s many vertical and horizontal elements.”²¹

Jonathan Nesci’s Response to Saarinen’s Architectural Theology

Christian artists and designers can caringly engage the paradox of sin and redemption by representing a world of sorrow and joy. Humble but acute awareness of Christ’s love for God’s world can produce work that points to the light of hope rather than pessimistic distrust. Such artistic action becomes a service to humankind that enriches life. Theologian Cecilia González-Andrieu, quoting from Alejandro Garcia-Rivera writes: “Aesthetics is about hope and the ‘theological dimension of art lies in that, ultimately, art interprets humanity to the human.’ In this, art mirrors and makes transparent one of the ways Christ brings salvation.”²²

Interestingly, this attitude correlates with that of some contemporary designers. Chicago graphic designer Rick Valicenti pursues “a real human presence” in the design of artifacts.²³ The most compelling designs are not dependent on formulaic answers that deprive it of character. Valicenti believes that as artists and designers we go where curiosity leads us, exploring and ascertaining, while concentrating on idea, artistry, and technique. At the convergence of skill and knowledge, we craft meaningful pieces and express unique experiences. Further, art and design is integral to the human condition; at its best it is ubiquitous, nourishing, and transformative. Meaningful design allows us to connect with one another and compels us to slow down and pay attention. Valicenti’s thoughts are wonderfully communicated and manifested by the work of a young designer, Jonathan Nesci of Chicago and Columbus, Indiana.

For several years Nesci has designed furniture based on the proportions of the golden ratio and named it the Golden Variation. As he says, “I’ve been really interested in the idea of manifested order. Whether it be a building, a city plan, or a table, the idea of mathematics informing and forming our built environment interests me a great deal.”²⁴

When Nesci was offered the opportunity to design a site-specific art installation for Columbus, he chose Saarinen’s First Christian Church mainly because he intuitively sensed the shapes and proportions of the building were similar to his own furniture design. Nesci’s curiosity in using the golden ratio as a design method led to his discovery of how Saarinen utilized it at First Christian Church.²⁵

100 Variations

In 2014, independent curator Christopher West, with a coalition of arts advocates, initiated and organized a program that celebrated design in Columbus by pairing a contemporary artist and designer with one of Columbus’ most significant buildings. Jonathan Nesci was invited to design and install a site-specific installation that ran from October 10-12, 2014 at First Christian Church. The installation was titled *100 Variations: New Reflections on Eliel Saarinen and the Golden Ratio*.

Nesci’s installation consisted of 100 unique, mirror-polished aluminum occasional tables installed on the sunken courtyard lawn of the church. The highly reflective and polished surfaces of the tabletops reference the reflecting pool that was originally a part of the church’s design but was removed in 1957 due to maintenance concerns.

While developing the project, Nesci stated, “Another insight that came via research was discovering the golden ratio grid that Eliel used in planning the space, which is in the DNA of all 100 of my tables. When you walk around the church you can see these motifs that look so similar to

my shapes.”²⁶ Nesci superimposed the precision of computer technology and CNC machining on Saarinen’s construction drawings of the church to form patterns for his polished tabletops. “Each table is also asymmetrical as that was one of the discoveries I made during the process that Eliel didn’t care for symmetry.”²⁷ In keeping with the spirit of theological architecture, Nesci’s tables metaphorically reflect the following essential ideas: 1.) The tables in addition to being occasional tables also reference the sacraments, specifically the communion table. 2.) The number 100 represents a complete, full number. Nesci was also paying homage to others in their use of 100: e.g., Donald Judd’s *100 Boxes*, Marfa, Texas and Martino Gamper’s *100 Chairs in 100 Days*.²⁸ 3.) The installation suggests the past, present, and future. The polished surface expresses the notion that something has happened yet it continues to happen. The shiny reflections suggest the primordial past, the material and physical object signify the elemental present, the style is instinctively futuristic. 4.) Each table top design was asymmetrically varied with respect to the golden ratio in playful reference to Saarinen’s building.

Nesci, in a lyrical way, responds theologically to the notional grid fostered by Saarinen to help viewers slow down and notice the exterior and interior design of First Christian Church. As Nesci describes it, “I’ve used the golden ratio to assist in developing forms for more than five years. It has given me a form that I can use over and over again to experiment with new scales, materials, and processes. It’s my hope that the installation will for a moment bring the reflection back, reflecting Eliel Saarinen’s work both physically and in spirit.”²⁹

Although Nesci’s variations in his 100 tables are beautifully proportioned, by using Saarinen’s asymmetrical grid and golden ratio proportions, the designs are never robotic. Instead they are intuitively ordered by using the golden ratio as a universal and natural geometric system. As church architecture, Nesci addresses a central theological question by grouping his 100 tables

together to form a larger “pool” that reflects the church as the surrounding atmospheric changes by day and night. He captures the importance of restoration and being in community. According to Nesci, the installation symbolizes “being integral with the church rather than at the church.”³⁰ In doing so, he gets to the heart of the gospel and finds a place where the two worlds of contemporary art and the church meet.

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