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**Modern forms | Harris Armstrong | Faith & Congregation**

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ST. LOUIS ETHICAL SOCIETY BUILDING

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ABSTRACT
Analysis of the St. Louis Ethical society building. Harris Armstrong and development of his design methods.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an analysis of selected works of noted St. Louis-based modernist architect Harris Armstrong. Of particular interest to this discussion is the St Louis Ethical Society building located in Ladue, Missouri, built in 1961. This remarkable structure is contrasted with other projects designed by Armstrong for worship and congregation, enabling a discussion of his design process and the development of the modern idiom in his work. Using photographs, drawings, and textual description the paper examines key architectural features seen in these designs and is accompanied by a snapshot of the biography of the architect. By unravelling some early drawings from the architect’s archive one can reconstruct the design process and see how the current iteration of the design was arrived upon.

The Ethical Society is a historic organization and has been meeting in the city since the late 1880s\(^1\). Their journey to the current building is discussed briefly, and their beliefs are presented so that the stunning design vision for the project can be understood. Other faiths and congregations in the St. Louis region which have strikingly different beliefs but have also inspired equally incredible works of architecture are presented here as a corollary to begin to understand the different schools of thought prevalent in the region at the time. Armstrong designed multiple projects in the St Louis region and was a prolific designer, but sadly his genius was not as celebrated as some of his contemporaries. In recent years, through the painstaking work of historians and preservationists, we have been able to locate, refurbish and highlight the importance of these works of architecture and appreciate them more fully.

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This research has been carried out due to the enormous generosity of the WU archives. The Armstrong collection was an excellent source of documents, drawings, and correspondence. I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Ms. Miranda Rectenwald who worked patiently with me over the eve of her thanksgiving break to sift through material and large numbers of boxes to locate documents for this research project.

2.0 HARRIS ARMSTRONG

Harris Armstrong was an American architect, based in St Louis. He is heralded by architectural historians and has been described as holding “a unique place in the history of St. Louis architecture as the first architect to design and erect a building in the full-fledged International Style”\(^2\)

Armstrong was born in Edwardsville, Illinois in 1899. The eldest son to a tobacco salesman, in his youth Armstrong frequently moved around the country as his father travelled to establish his business. As a child he showed creative prowess but struggled in regular school due to dyslexia.\(^3\)

He served the nation in World War I in 1917. After his discharge he began pursuing work as an architect. He initially worked with several prominent firms of the day, including George Brueggeman, LaBeaume & Klein, and Maritz & Young. He had limited formal education; he attended a few night classes at Washington University and later spent one year as a special student at the Ohio State University. It is at Ohio State that we get the first glimpse of his talent and prowess. He won an award from the Beaux Arts Institute of Design for a competition for a bank lobby design. This design was in a classical style and it is remarkable that although Armstrong was trained as a classical designer, he went on to defy the norms and produce modern designs over the course of his career.

The next phase of his life was heralded by his marriage to Louise McClelland in 1925. Although they had grown up as childhood neighbors Louise did not recognize him when they had a chance

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encounter on a train from Webster Groves to St. Louis. She was very impressed by his ideas and passion about architecture.

Armstrong built his first house on Big Bend in Webster Groves with money borrowed from his father. His first two children were born soon after. During this time Louise supported the family by doing several odd jobs, such as selling floral arrangements and real estate. Armstrong struggled to obtain assignments and was known to sketch his architectural dreams in a studio in their backyard.

After a short stint in New York Armstrong was back in St. Louis and began to get a few projects. Notable among these was a gas station for the Shell company at the intersection of Vandeventer and Lindell boulevards. The design was an art deco styled, “striking wedge-shaped terracotta-clad building” with a tall mast. He did not get much credit for this since it was published anonymously. Here we can observe how he liked working with natural materials as well as an affinity for tall vertical elements within his designs. This project can be said to be his first as he transitioned into the modern idiom.

Armstrong’s work made significant progress in 1935, when he designed the Cori Residence and the Shanley Building in the international style. For the Shanley Building Armstrong had the opportunity to design an up to date dental office and here he explored many new construction details such as “an early example of insulated glazing, a unique suspended courtyard wall supported on metal brackets, an adjustable awning combined with a glass curtain wall, glass blocks, a spiral stair, a minimal handrail with

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integral drip-edge, originally designed door hardware, furniture, and light fixtures, and a backlit, frescoed soffit in the patient waiting room.\(^5\) This project was featured by magazines such as the *Architectural Record, Architectural Review* and won the silver medal at the International Exposition of Technical Arts in France in 1937. Until World War II Armstrong had a steady stream of projects and he was awarded in magazines and published studies for the riverfront design in St. Louis as well. He began to be recognized as the Master of Modern Design in St. Louis.

The period immediately after the Second World War was very beneficial to his practice. His design for the Lutheran church in West Florissant was one of the first to use A-frame design for a religious structure. He designed a high-rise office building and showroom for the American Stove Company for their national headquarters. The resultant structure came to be known popularly as the Magic Chef Building and featured an intrinsic and exciting ceiling sculpture by noted artist Isamu Noguchi. Armstrong was instrumental in incorporating natural lighting and broke the monolith designs of the earlier modernist aesthetic. The project catapulted him to national fame as it was on the cover of *Architectural Forum* in October 1948.\(^6\)

In 1948 Armstrong received another accolade by placing 4th in the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial competition design. He was the only St. Louis-based architect to make it to the shortlist. He designed a cancer research building for Washington University which was the culmination of his expertise in medical buildings that began with the Shanley building.

In the 1950s Armstrong designed an eclectic mix of large and small projects, some based locally, and others internationally. To list a few: The Plaza Square Apartment Complex (Downtown St Louis), Scruggs Department Store (Clayton), residences for US Gypsum, PPG Industries and the University of Michigan, the United States Consulate (Basra, Iraq) and the General Services Office Building (Kansas City, Missouri).

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5 Andrew Raimist, “Harris Armstrong Biography, Pg 1 Architectural Ruminations (blog)" 2019, http://andrewraimist.com/..

His two major projects in the 1960s were the McDonnell Aircraft Engineering Campus and the Ethical Society in Ladue. A major innovation of the engineering campus was to use spray ponds as cooling towers for the HVAC systems. The Ethical Society building featured a striking roof and some wonderful daylit internal spaces.

Armstrong officially retired in 1969 and died of a heart attack in 1973. Throughout his career he worked from a small office with minimal staff and was interested in the education and training of young architects. He was a passionate gardener and collected tropical fish. He published many articles in local newspapers and magazines about architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, and automotive design. His last published essay was titled, “Detailing the Final Finish of Architectural Design.” It stressed the importance detailing held for him both functionally and formally throughout his career.

3.0 LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE ATONEMENT (WEST FLORISSANT, MO)

Armstrong designed multiple religious structures and it is fascinating to revisit these to chart the development of his design ideals. One of the early interesting examples of his church designs was the high roofed A-frame design he proposed for the Lutheran Church of the Atonement. Here he used an unnaturally tall roof and was able to minimize costs at the same time, create a striking structure with celebrated structural simplicity.

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The photographs show the context of the design, which heralded a new way of building for small congregations in rural settings. A contemporary magazine which discussed the design of the church said, “More and more rural and suburban congregations are turning to single, high gabled roofs for their new churches. The bold simplicity of the form fits well with modern concepts of worship; its economy appeals immediately to the many church groups with limited budgets. And behind it lie deep traditions. It is the old north country church boiled down to a new structural clarity appropriate to its times yet retaining the best of old essentials: the warm neighborly personality, the humble aspiration and some of the medieval magic. Its triangular silhouette – a symbol of stability, shelter, prayer – conveys the ideas “church” so universally and strongly that elaborate bell towers, steeples and sculpture can often be omitted.” Speaking more specifically of the Lutheran Church at West Florissant, the article called attention to the “unusually steep roof supported in wooden A frames. These are carried to their footings clear of the low walls front or side to keep the structural system honestly visible. A chancel curtain and storage for folding chairs and tables adapt the nave to social activities.”

The church is estimated to have been able to house 200-250 worshippers and was built at a cost of about $15 per sq.ft. Armstrong was also involved in a second addition to this project after initially completing this design in 1952. This building was demolished in 1994.

4.0 FIRST CHURCH OF GOD

The First Church of God is a small structure and Armstrong designed a radical addition as an extension to a traditional church. It is located at 3rd and Mineral street in De Soto, Missouri, located southwest of St. Louis. The church was a traditional stone masonry building with a gable roof. They bought some additional property to expand their educational facilities and required new classrooms and some administrative office space. Armstrong’s solution was to propose a pure rectangular box with a flat roof and a distinctive façade treatment. From the renderings and drawings available in the Washington University archives it seems that the façade featured rectilinear wooden paneling in a concentric design. He also added a new atrium and a small sloping roof overhang with some entry steps. Although this

9 “Harris Armstrong Collection, 1924-1972 | WUA University Archives. Series 3 BOX 02 WUA00372,”
project was never built, I am fascinated by the bold choices Armstrong made here. The renderings depicting the interiors show some patterns and proportions which are seen later in the southern entry façade in the Ethical Society Building. These ideas which repeat throughout his career show a steady progression in his design thinking and allow us to decipher his intentions as being part of a longer trajectory and not sporadic impulses.10

5.0 STUDENT CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION

This project was built in 1961 and is perhaps the most visually similar to the Ethical Society Building. As per the renderings for the project in the Washington University Archives two adjoining structures are depicted but only the smaller structure with the central skylight was built. The adjoining structure had a very high roof with a form which closely resembles the eventual design for the Ethical Society Building. Therefore, this might have been a direct precursor to that project.11

The smaller structure still stands today and is home to the Gaia House Interfaith Center. This is located on South Illinois Avenue in Carbondale Illinois. The existing structure is part of the campus of the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

10 “Harris Armstrong Collection, 1924-1972 | WUA University Archives. Series 5 BOX DR 13.11.”
11 “Raimist Andrew, Catalogue of Architectural Works Harris, Pg 93, Armstrong Collection, 1924-1972 | WUA University Archives. Series 11 BOX 01”
The Gaia Interfaith Center has evolved over time to ensure that their mission remains inclusive and is accepting of people of all faiths and backgrounds. They cater “to a variety of meetings, dinners, and other events attended and organized by people of many faiths including Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Native Americans, Wiccans, and several Christian denominations.” They are “one of the few or only places where an interest group or faith has a physical location to call home.” Also, they are “one of the only places in Southern Illinois where so many diverse groups gather openly and freely in one place to engage in dialog and share in community.”

Although this is a much smaller congregation and essentially a student-run institute the ideals and beliefs closely resemble those of the Ethical Society. This leads me to think that perhaps the striking slope of the roof resembles the upward rising and high ideals of these egalitarian societies. I think that Armstrong saw these ideals as something to celebrate and highlight in these projects.

6.0 ST. LOUIS ETHICAL SOCIETY

To understand and decode this building it is very important to learn a little about the evolution of the Ethical Society and its growth from a modest congregation to a leader of an egalitarian lifestyle in the region today. Felix Adler is the founder of Ethical thought and in his address in New York (1873) he recalibrated traditional Judeo-Christian religion as a brotherhood of all men and women. Following his

initial address several societies were set up in the country, in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and then St. Louis.

The Ethical Society was established in 1887 in St. Louis, when Felix Adler addressed an organizational meeting of what was then called the Society for Ethical Culture of St. Louis. The size of the congregation was 93 members. The society began as a Sunday school that was solely focused on the education of young children and providing parents an alternative to regular denominational religious schooling and practices. In 1896, the Society held its first social meeting and planned to expand and have more social gatherings. The name of the organization was changed to “The Ethical Society of St. Louis.” To unite the various ethical societies in different cities in the nation, an umbrella organization called the “American Ethical Union” was set up in 1899.13

In the early years, the group met in the basement of the St. Louis Museum and School of Fine Arts located at 19th and Locust streets in downtown St. Louis. This was prior to the Saint Louis Art Museum being re-located to Forest Park as part of the World’s Fair held in 1904. Following the move of the museum the building fell in disrepair and was demolished in 1919.

Following this development, according to the Ethical Society’s blog, “the search began for a new home. Anna Sheldon, the widow of the Society's first Leader, Walter Sheldon, supported the construction of a permanent meeting house with an endowment that was matched by contributions

from Society members. Designed by 1904 World’s Fair architect Louis Spiering, the Sheldon Memorial Hall was dedicated in 1912 and served as the Society's official home until 1964. The Sheldon now serves as a musical and cultural resource to the St. Louis metropolitan area.”

With the foundation of a new building and addition of social programming the group began to extend more influence and gather more members to its congregation. They set up a membership committee to steer the group (1911) and elected the first woman to the board in 1915. The Sheldon Memorial Hall became a very active hub for meetings and gatherings. There were an estimated 45 meetings on different subjects each month. In 1928 disaster struck when a fire severely damaged the building as well as the organ. There was a period of three years of contrasting views with respect to the best way forward for the group. The society voted initially to sell the Sheldon but then the next year there was a new vote which defeated the motion. The Society did some research and concluded that it might be too expensive to build a new building and continue to operate out of the Sheldon. There were significant repairs made to the roof in 1950, and at about this time the mortgage for the Sheldon was paid off and an endowment fund created for their operations. In 1959 a consensus was achieved, and a property was purchased in Clayton with the goal of building a new meeting house for the society. The members appointed Harris Armstrong as the architect, and it was completed and dedicated in 1965. The design of the new building reflected the ideals of the Society and their promotion of the uplift of the human spirit.

In 1974, the Ethical Society sold their old meeting house, the Sheldon Memorial, and it was converted to a concert hall. For both the meeting houses the acoustics were very important and that was something that Armstrong paid special attention to while designing the Ethical Society Building.

In 1999, the Ethical Society Building needed to be expanded to meet the requirements of the society and a new wing was commissioned. Since then, there have been updates to the governance structures and installation of new audio and visual systems in 2016.

15 “American Ethical Union » History.”
The 50th anniversary of the Ethical Society Building was commemorated in 2015. The Ethical society in an interesting juxtaposition and I am fascinated by the service they provide. They are an offshoot from dogmatic religious thoughts and practices, yet they provide an effective sense of community and create a kinship for their members which are traditional roles that religions fulfil.

It is difficult for me to classify their beliefs into certain thoughts or words since they are constantly evolving and intentionally careful to be as inclusive as possible. I highly respect this attitude as it shows that they are not afraid to change what they preach and allow the human experience to be molded and updated as society evolves, and we discover more about ourselves. By not having traditional hierarchal structures and being flexible and open to people from all faiths and religions I think they create an interesting space to have dialogue and connect with the community. Like all communities they are extremely invested in events for educating children and have multiple avenues for parents to involve their kids.

In all they are extremely aware of their responsibility to create a safe space and provide an opportunity for people who may feel that they are shunned by more traditional religious organizations. By nature of an excellent outreach program, one can learn more about them via their publications, regular podcasts or video addresses that are made to their congregations.  

In summation, they are highly active and are charged with upholding the dignity of the human spirit and allowing each person to realize their potential to the fullest regardless of their background or religious denomination.

7.0 St Louis Ethical Society Building

The Ethical Society Building is remarkable, and its true sense of space can only be fully understood and appreciated by visiting it. Designed in 1961 and dedicated in 1965, research in the Washington

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See also: They also state, “Our core belief is that every person is worthy and should be treated with dignity. We fight against all forms of oppression which strip the dignity from people, seeking always to view people as beings worthy of respect. This is why we have consistently championed the rights of women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, economically disadvantaged people, and all people suffering from oppression.”
University Archives revealed much about its design, including, surprisingly, an earlier iteration of the building. The form is markedly different with a circular auditorium space with a colonnaded entry pavilion. One can deduce that the clients might have revised the size of the auditorium since the early iteration called for a much larger space accommodating more people. The other sketches, working drawings and blueprints from the archive provide a comprehensive set of drawings that describe the building beautifully as it was built.

The building is located in Ladue at 9001 Clayton Road. Entering the site from the south via Clayton Road there is a steep elevation change and two traffic lanes on the edges of the plot slope down towards the main structure. These driveways lead one to the main entry and then continue towards the back of the building where there is a large parking lot. The building in plan is in the form of a wide rectangle which spans almost the width of the plot. There are a couple of reflecting pools in front of the buildings. These were innovations by Armstrong which function as heat sinks for the HVAC systems.17

On approaching the site, one can barely see anything of the main structure except the sharp pointed roof which is singularly unique in its form and materiality. The structure is set back about 150 feet from the main road and a gentle landscaped berm precedes it. This creates a very effective illusion that there is a floating roof structure on the grass. Although due to its striking roof design the building

does not seem to be trying to be one with nature, it is not jarring to look at and seems to be anchored very well within the site.

The main entry is via a drop off on the south side, and a platform runs around the main building. Once at this level the building begins to reveal itself a little more. The roof of the structure extends as a trellis and there is an overhang created which is supported by a series of slender twin columns and precast mitered outriggers. There are two large entryways which lead one to an intermediary lobby space. Through further double doors one can enter the main auditorium space.
The entryways puncture a wall that is intricately detailed with some rectangular panels which are made of colored glass. This creates an intense experience as you enter the building and find the intermediate lobby space filled with highly dramatic light. The positioning of this on the South façade helps the space to be well lit and bright. This effect is further enhanced due to the location of the reflecting pools on this side of the building. The reflection of the light of the pools of water and through the colored glass create a very memorable entry experience.

The central auditorium or meeting room is a windowless square room. It is a large continuous space without any columns within the hall. Concrete columns are placed on the periphery where they rise up and support the custom curved gluelam beams which rise to the top to support the roof and central skylight. The main hall is a square in plan and the central skylight is a smaller square offset around the same axis. Between these two structures there are 16 main beams and 16 shorter beams that run concentrically around the center of the hall.
The shape of the roof is distinctive, unique yet very simple to understand at the same time. The ridges in the roof converge to a single point from the square plan of the meeting room and rise like lines of force. This upward motion of the roof elements creates the drama that is intrinsic to the design of this building. The roof is lined with composite roofing material on the outside. It rises like a solid cone but towards the very top of the roof structure it is open and lets in natural light. There are 4 small plastic skylights set within a copper frame which make the meeting room weatherproof and help in creating an acoustically sound enclosure. "The skyward thrust of the roof symbolizes the Society's aim to bring out the best in the human spirit."18

The interior of the hall is lined with pecan wood paneling.19 Armstrong was very particular about colors and worked with the members of the Ethical Society to choose the fabric of the seats in the auditorium. The central hall also originally featured a pulley and a central light fixture whose height could be adjusted as per the use of the space. Armstrong prepared some stunning detailed drawings to specify the light fixture and the pulley mechanism.20 The acoustics of the hall were worked out by Armstrong, and by using appropriate sound- absorbing materials he was able to create a harmonious space for the congregation. It was his goal "to provide acoustics that are among the best in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The auditorium also includes the first baroque tracker organ built in the St. Louis area."21 He also designed numerous other details and custom mechanisms, for example he included drawings for custom light shades in the reception room.22

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18 "Meeting Houses." Ibid. (11)
19 Andrew R, "Ethical Society Gets Distinguished Building Award."ibid(13)
20 “Harris Armstrong Collection, 1924-1972 | WUA University Archives. Series 5 BOX DR 13.11.”
21 “Meeting Houses.” Ibid. (11)
22 “Harris Armstrong Collection, 1924-1972 | WUA University Archives. Series 5 BOX DR 13.11.”
The main meeting room is augmented by some supporting classrooms and administrative spaces and “initially offered ample space for Society's ceremonies, gatherings, and programs, However, the growth of the Society in the 1980s and 1990s required more space and prompted the addition of a new wing. This wing features more meeting rooms and office space, a well-lit entry and stairwell, and an elevator.”

With the new additions the plan of the building has been slightly altered. However, it does not impede the view from the main road nor does it in any way significantly affect the original vision that Armstrong built. Historical architect Andrew Raimist remarks, “The organization is to be especially commended for the great attention to detail and maintaining the original architect's design in renovating and adding to the structure to meet current needs.”

The Ethical Society is built for a congregation with strong beliefs and the architectural vision of the project matches the vigor and passion of the members of the society. The building is more than 60 years old and during that time, the needs of any organization are bound to change and adapt. I am extremely glad that they have been excellent stewards and preserved the building with the care and dignity that a cultural icon like the Ethical Society Building deserves.

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23 “Meeting Houses.”
24 Andrew R, “Ethical Society Gets Distinguished Building Award.”
A counterpoint to the Ethical Society is the Priory Chapel. This structure was designed in 1962 by Gyo Obata for Benedictine monks who had travelled from England to set up an abbey in St Louis. They were a traditional Christian school and were as diametrically opposed to the Ethical Society on the religious spectrum as possible. However, the building that they commissioned was equally striking and is revered today for its daring design and advances in construction methodology.

The church's circular façade consists of three tiers of whitewashed, thin-poured concrete parabolic arches, the top one forming a belltower and the arches appearing to float upwards from their grassy base. They are faced with dark insulated-fiberglass polyester window walls which create a meditative translucency when viewed from within. The church contains several sacred sculptures and other, more modern sacred art by artists from around the world.

In my opinion, the Priory Chapel is an impressive counterpoint to the Ethical Society Building in the same region and built around the same time. The finish on the windows, in sunny hours, gives the impression from the inside that the individual is in another world, and the rhythm of the lines create an incredible space, one that creates a sense of comfort and awe. It struck me as quite remarkable that as I described the two buildings the sense of wonder and joy they evoked were eerily similar and this proved that the design of a space can transcend beliefs and faiths.
9.0 CONCLUSION

The mid-20th century was a very interesting time in the built history of St. Louis. There are several buildings dedicated to religious purposes and each has its unique characteristics and creates a wonderful design. As per the St Louis city report on nonresidential important modern buildings, “typically, one of the drivers in church design is the desire for vertical space within the primary gathering area. In the modern movement architects often utilized A-frame roofs, prow forms, and more plastic forms such as the parabolic arches and the other unique curvatures.” It further states that, “in St Louis, as in many parts of the country, churches and synagogues are among the most prominent and early examples of Modernist buildings constructed between the late 1930s and the early 1960s.”

It is noted that Modern architecture with its structurally innovative forms and its ready acceptance by religious institutions is a paradox, considering that those institutions have “the greatest dedication to the eternal.” “Yet, churches came to embrace Modern architecture for many of the same reasons that other building types and developers did. Modern architecture, in general, was more economical than traditional ecclesiastical architecture. Churches wanted to be forward-thinking to attract young families to their congregations.”

27 Meijer, “Modern St Louis.”
In conclusion I would like to opine that religious architecture is like other programmatic types of architecture. What I mean by that is that there are mundane apartment complexes as well as interesting and intricate ones, there are exceptional train stations and there are ones which we are hard pressed to record a mental image for. As per my understanding of the architectural design process the credit for a building is deserved by more than one individual. I feel that the best results to create monumental architecture are obtained when a creative tour-de-force like Harris Armstrong is backed by clients who realize the potential of that vision and encourage and empower them to fulfil their ideas.
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