

Preservation on Profile: Trinity Episcopal Church Roslyn, New York "What Do We Need An Architect For, Anyway?"

Trinity Episcopal Church is located in Roslyn, New York, on the north shore of Long Island. It is, in many ways, typical of small, older suburban Episcopal churches. However, with an active membership of 200, the congregation is amazingly eclectic, incorporating people from all walks of life and economic groups.

We are fortunate to possess a fine church building with an adjoining parish house. Constructed in 1906 to the designs of the renowned turn-of-the-century architect Stanford White, this was one of White's last architectural commissions and one of his very few churches. Three months after he had completed the drawings for the buildings, he was murdered by a jealous husband on the roof of the old Madison Square Garden in New York City (a building he also designed).

Most of Stanford White's buildings tend to be dramatic, in keeping with his flamboyant, "man-about-town" personality. However, Trinity is different. Built on a Latin-cross plan, our church draws stylistically on characteristics from the Romanesque as well as from Gothic parish churches of medieval England. It is a quiet, restful, spiritual space, deceptive in its simplicity. The craftsmanship is painstakingly superb, with tremendous attention to detail. For example, the angels at the ends of the roof hammer beams are all hand-carved and each has a different character. However, because Stanford White died before construction actually began, the execution of his plans seems not to have been properly supervised, and many mistakes were made that have contributed to the our current building problems. We love our buildings and we are struggling now to maintain and preserve them.

As with most religious institutions, the Vestry (Board of Trustees) has entrusted a committee, known at Trinity as the Property and Grounds Committee, with the task of overseeing the maintenance and repair of the buildings. We are responsible for myriad tasks ranging from repairing leaky faucets to repointing historic masonry. The Committee's members are all volunteers. We are a conscientious and responsible lot and we are familiar with contemporary building practices. However, we must stay within a tight budget.

For many years we believed that our financial situation did not permit us the luxury of consulting with an architect to help us address our building problems. Instead, we had relied on occasional technical support from the Roslyn Landmark Society, a local preservation group. It had proved itself to be an invaluable and reliable source of information and assistance for most of our questions.

The limitations of such ad hoc, pro-bono assistance became apparent when we began to address a major job, the replacement of the church's massive slate roof. In the late 1980s, chronic roof leaks were causing obvious damage to the structure and the interior of the building, and none of the methods we had used to correct this problem seemed to work. Upon inspection, we found that the roof underlayment had been incorrectly installed at the time of the building's construction. Instead of shedding water, it was allowing water that got underneath the roofing slates to leak in. In order to permanently take care of the problem, the church's vast slate roof would need to be taken up, the roof underlayment replaced, and new slates installed.

We invited five roofers to submit proposals for the best method of replacing the roof, along with estimates. What we received were five entirely different proposals, ranging widely in cost, materials, and techniques that confused and overwhelmed us. The Landmark Society informed us that this problem had arisen because we had not assembled a set of specifications so that all the roofers were presented with the same project. Instead, we had asked each contractor to determine the best course of action, and then bid on his or her own evaluation of the problem. In order to resolve this dilemma, the Landmark Society suggested we consult with a preservation architect.

It was relatively easy for the Landmark Society to convince the Committee of the necessity of hiring an architect. We had, after all, been the recipients of the confused mish-mash of proposals and estimates for a new roof. It proved somewhat more difficult to convince our Vestry. The first reaction of some of the members was one of skepticism. "What do we need an architect for, anyway? We've been doing this work fine on our own for years." "Won't an architect add greatly to the already enormous expenses of replacing the roof?"

Fortunately, we were able to provide the Vestry with some financial incentive for hiring an architect. In the process of raising money for the replacement of the roof, we had made an application for a grant from the Preservation Services Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and we received an award to do planning work. This was a major turning point. Armed with this grant, and with strong arguments, we were able persuade our Vestry to let us go ahead with hiring an architect. The Vestry also agreed to provide the funds from the parish's budget to match the grant from the Preservation Services Fund.

Due in large part to the recommendation of the Landmark Society, in May of 1991 we hired Walter Sedovic to conduct a condition survey of the church and review the estimates we had received from the roofing contractors. He sorted out our varied roof estimates by preparing a "Request for Proposal" that outlined the parameters of the project. For example, the roof was to be replaced in slate and was to include copper flashing. The roofers then re-submitted their bids based on Walter's guidelines.

After the bids were received, Walter assisted us in determining which bids to consider and which to discard. He based his evaluation on the price, general techniques proposed, and the experience of the contractor. He then inspected previously executed work of the two finalists and interviewed them. The Property and Grounds Committee and the Vestry made the final selection based on Walter's recommendation. We made the decision to use a New England-based firm, Yankee Steeplejacks. Although this was not a local company, the combination of price, experience, approach, workmanship, and the firm's obvious sympathy for older buildings convinced us that it was the right one for the job.

After we decided on a contractor, Walter prepared detailed specifications and contract documents for the work. [NOTE: This sequencing of architectural services was atypical; usually specifications are prepared before the job is let out to bid. Ed.] In the past we had relied on contractors we had chosen to take care of such details, and invariably the contracts were drawn up to serve the best interests of the contractor. However, with Walter we discovered how valuable it was to have a professional on

"our" side. He prepared the contract documents with the interests of the parish at heart. Walter used standardized contract forms prepared by the American Institute of Architects, which spell out all responsibilities of the owner, contractor, and architect, and the schedule of payments. In addition, the contract specified that all materials and work were to be approved by Walter before the contractor would be paid.

We also relied increasingly on Walter's expertise as actual work on the roof began. He made regular site visits while the job was in progress. On many occasions we discovered him seventy feet up on a steep slate roof making detailed inspections of the contractor's work. When the original designs for the roof drainage system proved inadequate, he completely re-designed gutter, leader, and flashing details, and worked with the roofer to ensure their correct installation. On one occasion he even had the contractor take apart and re-do some work that was not up to his standards.

As new problems have made their presence known cracks in the bellcote, leaks in the Parish Hall roof, deteriorating masonry, sinking floors we have found ourselves increasingly asking, "What does Walter think?", instead of "What do we need an architect for?" His solutions are practical and low-cost. While he has a commitment to quality, he doesn't always go for a "high-tech" expensive approach. His knowledge of materials and working procedures has, in fact, saved us money and prevented many mistakes. For example, he recommended using volunteer labor whenever possible, following his careful and detailed instructions. One project undertaken under his direction was the restoration of the church's oak doors. When we put the project out for bid, all the estimates that came in were too expensive. Walter suggested that the work be done using volunteers. He specified the work with the same care as he would if it were being put out for bid, and he inspected the volunteers' work and ordered corrections when necessary (albeit more gently than he probably would have with a contractor).

As the roof project neared completion and we were still faced with other building problems, we asked Walter to prepare a ten-year prioritized preservation plan and maintenance guide. This has been an invaluable tool. It allows us to plan and budget for major capital projects years in advance rather than dealing with a constant succession of crises. Walter has taken photographs of all phases of each project and regularly gives slide shows to the Vestry and the entire parish to keep everyone up-to-date with what's going on. His efforts have increased our congregation's appreciation for the building and the issues involved in its maintenance and preservation. This, in turn, has helped ensure the congregation's support for future projects.

It is startling to look back at the major projects begun and successfully completed in two short years and to realize how much we have come to depend on our architect's expertise and thoughtful advice in many areas including the restoration of our wrought-iron crosses, the choice of paint colors, and placement of lighting fixtures! We look forward to many more years of asking, "What does Walter think?"