CHAPEL OF ST JAMES THE FISHERMAN—Summer 2021 Newsletter
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Chapel Colored Glass Window—continued

In the newsletter last summer, I wrote a piece about the green and blue glass window behind the pulpit and piano in the Chapel. It has always been known that the window was not original to the Chapel: it was dedicated in memory of Rosa H. Blakeslee in the summer of 1962, five years after the Chapel was completed in 1957. The Blakeslee window, we had recently learned, was designed by György Kepes, a Hungarian-born artist and Wellfleet summer resident, who taught at MIT and specialized in color theory. The window was clearly a careful composition in variants of the two colors, green and blue, that are most strongly associated with Cape Cod’s woods and the waters of its ocean and the ponds. Memory fades over the years, however and there was no recollection of whether there had been a window behind the pulpit in the original structure or whether a blank wall had been opened to install the colored glass. That issue has now been resolved: a photograph published in the *Architectural Record* near the time of the Chapel’s dedication and re=published in 2014 in *Cape Cod Modern* apparently shows a multi-paned, clear-glass window in the back wall.

György Kepes is said to have referred the leading founder of the Chapel, James Pike, to Olav Hammarstrom when he was looking for an architect for the Chapel. Finnish-born Hammarstrom was very intentional about the play—indeed, the mystery—of light in this sacred space. The altar is flooded with light from a skylight that is cleverly baffled so that light pours in from an invisible source. Windows around the base of the four walls admit mysterious, unseen light.

(One might say there is too little light for the congregation to read hymns and prayers.) I believe Hammarstrom was mimicking the MIT Chapel completed in 1955 by his colleague Eero Saarinen. At MIT, windows at the base of the building are cantilevered above a shallow moat; and the water in the moat reflects upward onto the walls, causing them to shimmer, to disappear. Hammarstrom intended for the creosoted wood-plank walls of St James the Fisherman to disappear, making the centrality of the altar even more striking. The architect designed a clear-glass window on the back (west) wall with the same muntins or wooden dividers of the colored panes in the present window.

It is now possible to have a clearer understanding of the effect this light-flooded window had on the Chapel space and to suggest reasons for its replacement. Christy Sorensen last winter contacted Bob Arnold, who has an archive of photographs taken by his grandfather, Carey E. Melville. Carey and Maud Melville gave the land on which the Chapel was built, the back end of their lot, which stretched from their house on Cove Road to Route 6. The Melvilles, naturally, had a great interest in the construction of the Chapel and were devoted members of the congregation. Their daughter Maud Melville Arnold, a pillar of the congregation until her death in 2007, was an active participant in discussions about the design of the building. The Melvilles' graves are prominently sited near the cross in the columbarium.

Two pictures taken by Carey E. Melville are contemporary with the completion and dedication of the Chapel. One shows the exterior with the open door, through which can be seen the shadowy outlines of the altar and pulpit and, more clearly, the window. The second photo, taken from inside the main door, records the shell that serves as the baptismal font, the brightly illuminated altar, and the pulpit. Both images show the clear glass in the window behind the pulpit. Although the arrangement of the Chapel has the congregation surrounding the altar, it also has an axis: door—font—altar—pulpit—window.

The interior photo strikingly illustrates the virtual disappearance of the dark outer walls; the centrality of the altar, flooded with natural light; and the intensity of the light from the window. This light is, in fact, so bright that the window itself and the pulpit are blurred. Back-lighting, as we know from our own experiences as photographers and from viewing the paintings of J. M. W. Turner, can obscure objects and persons in the foreground. Imagine hearing a sermon on a bright Sunday morning back then: The preacher would be a shadow, lit from behind. Some preachers might look better faceless in that nimbus of light; but it would be hard to have eye-contact between members of the congregation and the homilist: the worshippers in the two farther bays of pews would be straining to see the person whose voice they heard.

Alternatively (and perhaps more likely), there may simply have been too much light coming in from the east, deconstructing the worship axis. In an oral history interview made some years later, Olav Hammarstrom discusses the importance of light in the Chapel but does not mention the east window. The multi-paned window is, however, in his drawings and plans for the Chapel. He may originally have thought that a single opening in the walls with light pouring in from the east behind the pulpit would have enhanced the sense of mystery, of presence, in his careful articulation of the play of light in this sacred space.

The window with clear glass must have been recognized early on as a design flaw. The Kepes-designed Blakeslee-memorial window attempts to correct that problem while retaining the original multi-paned pattern of the window and the axis from west door to east window.

More than six decades later, there is no way to know what the architect Olaf Hammarstrom thought about the replacement of his clear glass with Kepes's design of blue and green glass, but I think he would have approved of it. Perhaps he even suggested the substitution to overcome the problems caused by the clear-glass window. We shall never know for certain what Hammarstrom may have thought, but we do know that his original design was for a multi-paned window of clear glass behind the pulpit—and that it was soon replaced.