



Student Chapel, University of St. Thomas, Glenn Heim, designer, 1966.



DEPTH REMEME RACE space

The Seminarian and Student Chapels at the University of St. Thomas.

by Helen Fosdick in collaboration with Glenn Heim

In the mid-60s artist, designer, and builder Glenn Heim created two small, exquisite chapels on the University of St. Thomas campus. After graduating from the Cleveland Art Institute's industrial design program in 1962, Heim joined the Basilian Fathers, the Catholic order that established the university in 1947.

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They subsequently sent him to Houston as a scholastic to obtain a degree in philosophy prior to entering seminary. Heim and ten other pre-seminarians lived in a house on the corner of Mt. Vernon and Sul Ross streets, and it was in a room there in the summer of 1964, with the approval of the fathers and the help of two fellow scholastics, Donald Rigamonti and Dennis Andrews, that the Seminarian Chapel was built. At the time Heim was very much influenced by Le Corbusier, and especially his chapel at Ronchamps. It was with this inspiration that the first of his St. Thomas chapels was constructed in a small space measuring approximately 20 by 25 feet.

Heim designed all the elements of the Seminarian chapel and fabricated most of them himself. The cost, of necessity, was minimal. The original structural elements of the single room were very simple, with natural light coming from a single window facing west. Heim began by restructuring the chapel with various curved walls. A ceiling canopy was constructed to give intimacy to the tabernacle and altar areas. The area over the tabernacle was painted a deep cadmium red, and with the walls and the floor a light neutral tone, constituted the only real color in the chapel. The wall facing the entrance door had three four-by-eight-foot panels floating approximately six inches from its face. One of the three panels angled into the curved wall near the lectern; the other two were parallel to the wall. A horizontal line of natural cedar fragments bisected the panel at approximately eye level. A texture of natural wallboard compound was

applied to the panels, and thin lines were inscribed perpendicular to the cedar strips to counter the horizontal movement and lend a warmer white in contrast to the rest of the walls.

The altar was constructed of plywood with wallboard compound applied as a coating to give texture, then tinted grey to lend a faux-stone appearance. While home on leave in Iowa, Heim and his father fabricated the tabernacle of plate steel. Later Heim cut a design in the face of the tabernacle with a welding torch; his intention was a representation of the Paraclete. The remaining metal work for the lectern, cross, and seating he either welded himself or sent to a welding shop. Rigamonti and Andrews assisted on all the drywall,

painting, and electrical work, as well as the unfinished cedar table and benches.

Along with philosophy and theology studies at St. Thomas, Heim enrolled in art history classes where he met Howard Barnstone, who was teaching a class, and Dominique de Menil, who had taken over the direction of the department following

the death of Jermayne MacAgy in 1964. Heim invited them to see the Seminarian Chapel and while they were enthusiastic and positive about the design, Mrs. de Menil had one suggestion: replace the individual cane chairs and attached kneelers with the simpler concept of benches. Heim found unfinished cedar at a local lumberyard and followed her advice. The bench design was subsequently used in both the Student and Rothko Chapels.

Due to renovations taking place on the St. Thomas campus in 1965, the Basilian Fathers decided to move the original Student Chapel, located in the Link-Lee Mansion, to a garage-like building on Yoakum between Barnard and Sul Ross that had been used as a small student lounge. With Mrs. de Menil's encouragement, the Basilians asked Heim to design the new Student Chapel, and Howard Barnstone became his mentor and advisor on the project. It was to be a temporary space, as Philip Johnson's campus plan for the university already included the design of what was to become the Rothko Chapel.

The Seminarian Chapel existed only a few years until the scholastic program was moved from St. Thomas to two Basilian colleges in Canada, whereas the Student Chapel





ABOVE: Student Chapel.

OPPOSITE PAGE AND LEFT: Seminarian Chapel, Glenn Heim, designer, 1964.



was to exist for 32 years, until the opening of Johnson's Chapel of St. Basil in 1997.

The Student Chapel was constructed in a relatively small space of approximately 30 by 32 feet. Heim made sketches and detailed drawings that, as with those of the earlier chapel, have unfortunately been lost. He also made full-scale mock-ups with cardboard of the furniture and fixtures; and the wall, ceiling, and floor curves were plotted with masking tape. Heim designed the steel tabernacle, candleholders, cross, lectern, and celebrant seating, which were fabricated by artist Jim Love. Fellow scholastics helped him complete the remainder of the construction: the wood stands, the altar, benches, drywall, and painting. A contractor installed the glass behind the altar. Once again,

Mrs. de Menil had a suggestion, which was to scale down the size of the altar that Heim had proposed in the mock-up. She mentioned to him her love for the Chapel of Saint-Séverin in Paris with its small-scale altar. "Of course she was right," states Heim today. "I changed the scale of the altar and later she sent me to Paris to see Saint-Séverin for myself."

The Menil support and encouragement given to Heim were in the same spirit of their future endeavors enabling extraordinary art and architecture in Houston. The Menil's generous contributions to the chapel project also included the 18th-century Spanish corpus on the central cross, the 14th-century Spanish polychrome stone statue of the Virgin and Child, and a small 14th-century

illumination of St. Michael that hung in the chapel narthex. For Glenn Heim, the experience of envisioning and building these two chapels was seminal: In them, he recognized his stronger vocation as an artist and designer and ended his seminary studies. After many years based in New York City, he now resides in western Massachusetts where he continues his work on art and design projects. Mrs. de Menil considered the Student Chapel a treasure and attended Mass there until it closed, which greatly saddened her. It was a remarkable experience to witness Mass with the large glass windows behind the altar and celebrants looking out onto a green garden of grass, bushes, and trees. The feeling of the room was ever quiet and soothing, the epitome of sacred space. ☪