



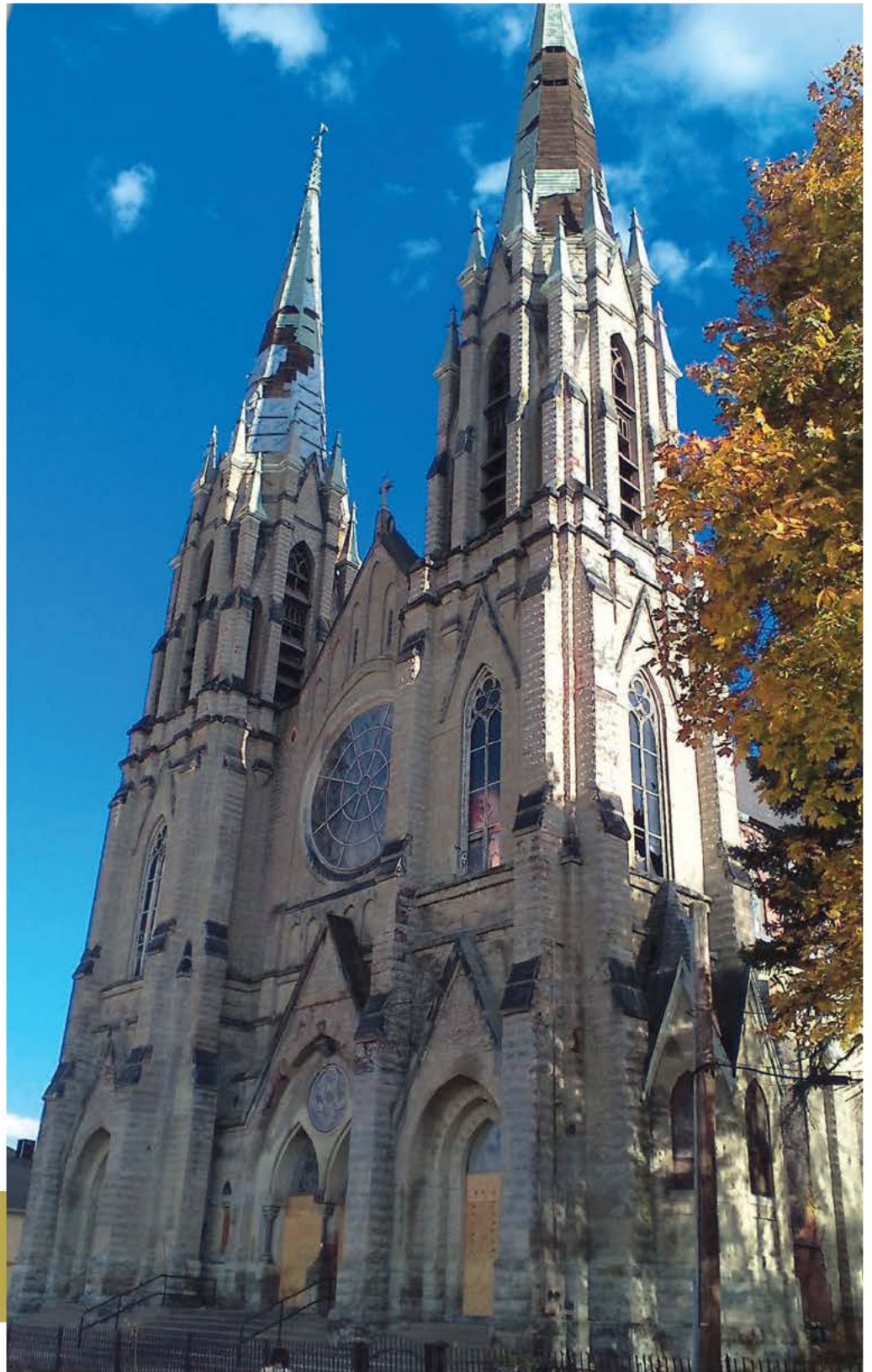
## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

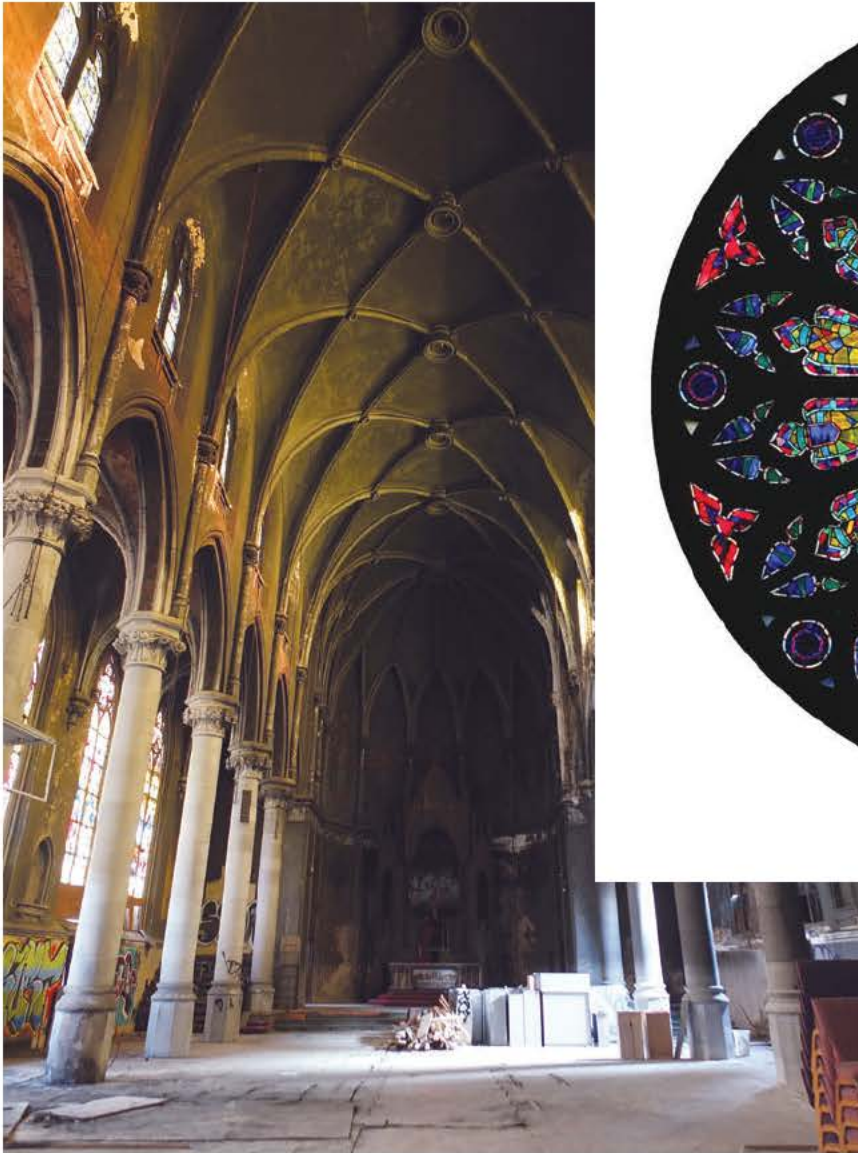
### Hidden in Plain Sight: Saints Peter and Paul in East Liberty

Twin steeples in East Liberty have often caught my eye and made me wonder how such a handsome structure could sit idle for so many years. I now know that the church was built by a German-speaking Roman Catholic congregation and called Saints Peter and Paul. The parish was combined with five other East End churches in 1992. The Diocese sold the church in 1997 to the Everlasting Covenant Church now located in LaGrangeville, New York, near Poughkeepsie. The new owners never could get their funding sorted out and could neither re-use the facility in any significant way nor secure the site from vandals. Further investigation revealed that there is a large three-story school from 1906 on the property and a rectory large enough to house six priests adjacent to the church. How did this once elegant Gothic Revival church get to this precarious state and what is the fate of this complex? These items will

Saints Peter and Paul,  
130 Larimer Avenue.  
*Photo by Lu Donnelly.*







**Above:**  
Rose window designed by Lawrence  
Saint, façade wall of Sts. Peter and  
Paul church.

Photo by J. Dillion Asher, Jr.

**Left:**  
Interior of Sts. Peter and Paul church.

Photo by J. Dillion Asher, Jr.

be discussed in public forums now that East Liberty Development, Inc., has been named conservator for the abandoned property by the courts and has begun securing the site.

Saints Peter and Paul was one of 17 German-speaking Catholic congregations in the city. In the 19th century what we now consider Germany was not politically unified; immigrants came from Hesse-Darmstadt, Swabia, the Rhineland, the

Austro-Hungarian Empire, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Belgium. Their only commonality was the German language, and most felt it was important that their churches preserve their customs and heritage. A lot was donated to a group of German-speaking Catholics along Larimer Avenue in 1856, and the following year Charles F. Bartberger (1823-1896) designed a church (now demolished) for them.

Bartberger was born in Baden, Germany, and came to Pittsburgh in 1845. It appeared important to this congregation that the architects of their buildings be of Germanic heritage, as they all were.

In 1887, plans were solicited from Adolphus Druiding of Chicago for a new church at 130 Larimer Avenue. Druiding (1839-1899) was one of two German-born architects working in the United States with





Rectory of Sts. Peter and Paul,  
130 Larimer Avenue.

Photo by Lu Donnelly.

a national clientele; he would design over 400 churches and other structures all over the country.<sup>1</sup> He arrived in the United States from his studies in Berlin and Munich in 1865. The building boom after the Civil War attracted many German-born and -trained architects.<sup>2</sup> Druiding was popular because he would use brick rather than stone and adapt his church designs for congregations without large endowments. Thus today we can see that the stone façade of Sts. Peter and Paul actually covers a brick church that was dedicated in 1892.

Between 1904 and 1906, a new school, designed by Ernst & Hanselmann, was built immediately behind the church along a street no longer used called Flavel. The three-story brick school in a handsome

Classical style is also now in a precarious state of disrepair.<sup>3</sup>

In 1909, the church was struck by lightning and the entire roof collapsed. Another prolific and talented church architect was hired, John Theodore Comes (1873-1922) of Pittsburgh. He replaced the interior columns and roof with stone and concrete and raised the height of the interior, allowing a clerestory. Again, the congregation had hired a Luxembourg-born architect familiar with the German language and customs to design its church. A spectacular rose window created by Lawrence Bradford Saint (1885-1961) for the Petgen Company was installed above the entrance on Larimer Avenue. It was exhibited at the Pittsburgh Architectural

Club Exhibition in 1910 and remains intact today. Saint went on to design the stained glass at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

In 1916, thick layers of cement were added to the exterior to give the impression that the church was built of stone. In 1927, a new rectory designed by Albert Francis Link (1873-1946) was constructed adjacent to the church and set back from Larimer Avenue. In a brick Tudor Revival style, the building could accommodate six priests with large common areas on the first story.

While this complex has been hidden in plain sight and is now in jeopardy, its history and architectural legacy deserve to be honored. ✪



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**Lu Donnelly** is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010), a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on topics in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

- <sup>1</sup> The other was Franz George Himpler (1833-1916). See Roy A. Hampton III, "German Gothic in the Midwest: The Parish Churches of Franz Georg Himpler and Adolphus Druiding," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15, no. 1 (Catholic University of America Press): 51-74.
- <sup>2</sup> Born in Hanover, he appears to have studied at the Royal Academies of both Berlin and Munich. He settled first in St. Louis, Missouri. His first recorded design was for St. Joseph's parish in Jasper, Indiana, in 1867.
- <sup>3</sup> Monsignor Joseph Suehr, *A Short History of SS. Peter and Paul's Church, E. E., Pittsburgh PA: in Remembrance of its Golden Jubilee, 1859-1909* (Pittsburgh: Eibel's Print Shop, c. 1909-1910).

### Former Sts. Peter and Paul school.

Photo by Lu Donnelly

