



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Angelique Bamberg

Akron Plan Churches

Few building types are so closely associated with history and tradition as houses of worship. Yet religious architecture, like religion itself, evolved and expanded in response to economic, cultural, and technological forces after the Civil War. One result was a new model for church design known as the auditorium or Akron plan.

In Pittsburgh and other industrial communities of western Pennsylvania, immigrants supported a rich culture of Protestantism. Until the late 19th century, Protestant church design had mimicked the familiar configurations of European Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches, which placed an emphasis on ritual and the

hierarchical separation between clergy and laity. Architecturally, such concepts were expressed by symmetrical, longitudinal or cruciform plans; a deep nave for seating the congregation; a chancel at the front of the church reserved for the clergy; a high altar against the rear wall; and an elevated pulpit from which the minister addressed the congregation.

The houses of worship of nonconformist American Protestants—such as Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists—broke with these historical precedents after the Civil War. Two simultaneous innovations combined to comprise a new style of worship hall at around this time.

First came the theater-style seating adopted by Protestant congregations whose worship practices placed an emphasis on the spoken word. Charismatic preachers began to draw crowds too large for traditional sanctuaries; longitudinal plans were limited

East End Presbyterian Church, Peebles St., Wilkinsburg, Pa.

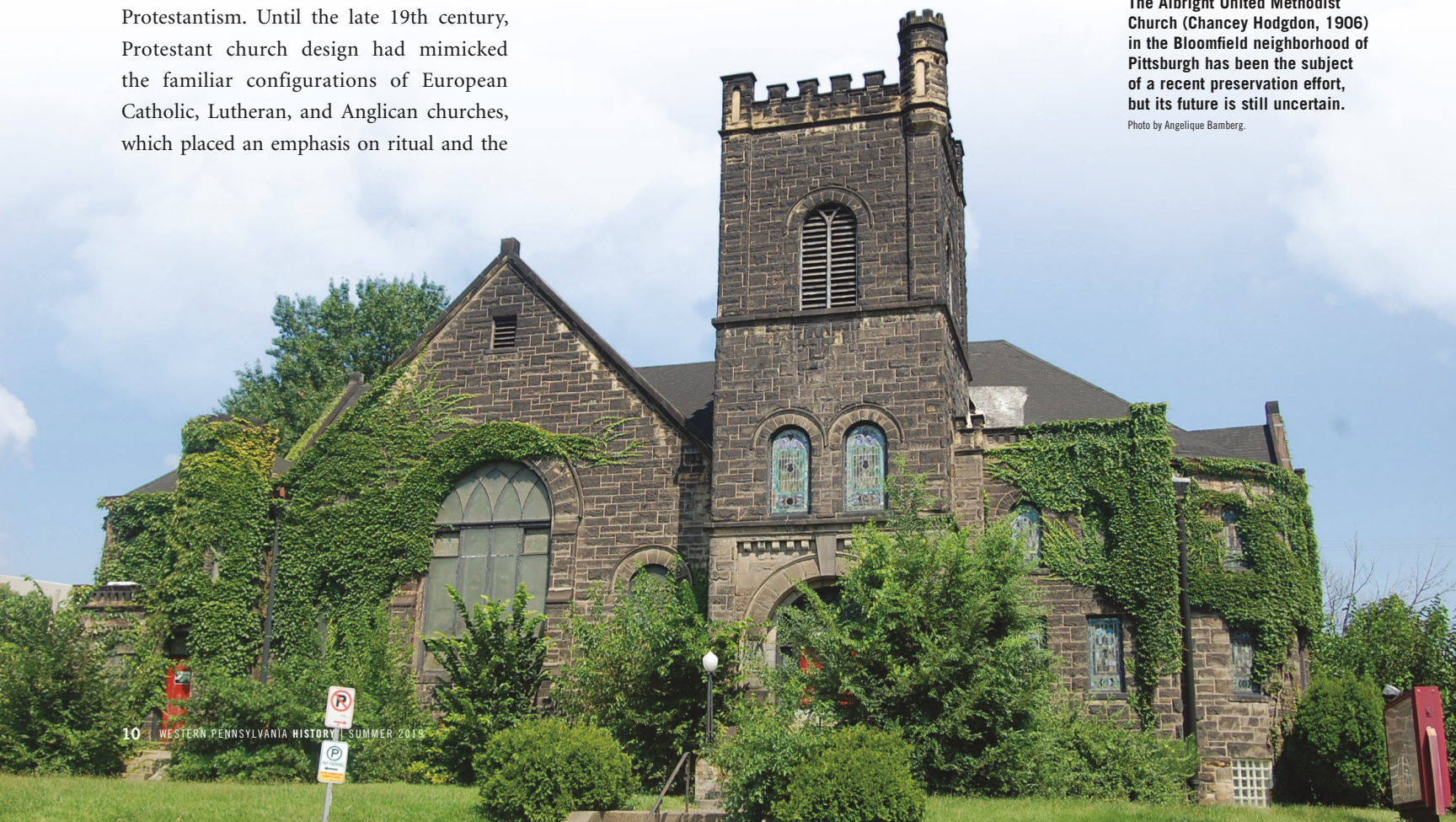
The former East End Presbyterian Church at Peebles and Franklin streets in Wilkinsburg has a corner entrance well-suited to its interior plan and its corner site.

Postcard postmarked 1911; courtesy of Wilkinsburg Historical Society.



The Albright United Methodist Church (Chancey Hodgdon, 1906) in the Bloomfield neighborhood of Pittsburgh has been the subject of a recent preservation effort, but its future is still uncertain.

Photo by Angelique Bamberg.



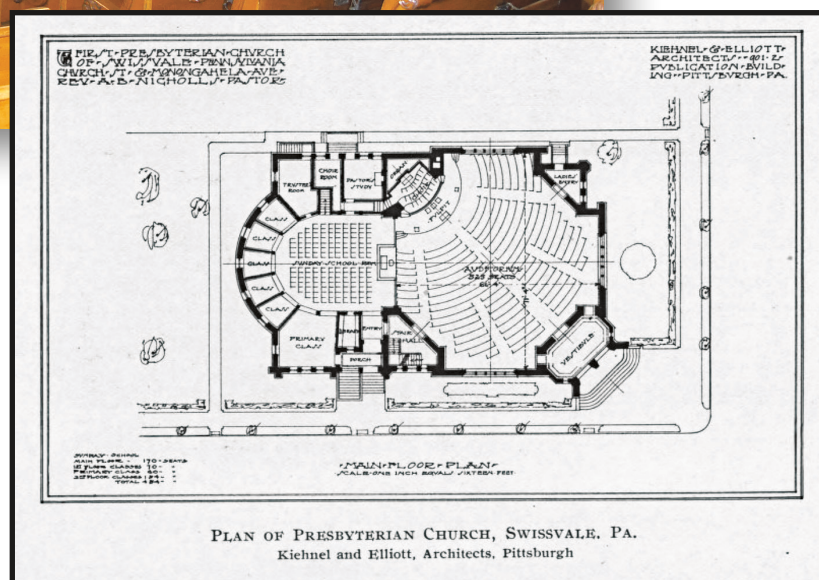


Sanctuary of the First United Presbyterian Church of Braddock (John Beatty, 1893). Concentric, arched rows of pews face the pulpit and a pipe organ donated by Andrew Carnegie. The main Sunday school classroom is visible beyond the wooden partitions at right. These could be rolled down or up, depending on the need for overflow seating for the worship service.

Photo by Angelique Bamberg.

This floor plan for the First Presbyterian Church of Swissvale (Kiehnel and Elliott, 1910) shows clearly the relationship of the Sunday school to the building's auditorium-style worship hall.

University of Pittsburgh, Historic Pittsburgh Book Collection, Pittsburgh Architectural Club Fifth Exhibition Catalog, 1910.



in length, sight lines, and acoustics. Late 19th-century Protestants sought spatial configurations which diminished the separation between clergy and laity and provided an optimal setting for preaching. This coincided with advances in acoustical science and led to the development of a square auditorium configuration which simultaneously increased seating and decreased the distance between individual worshippers and the pulpit. Auditorium plan churches typically had a wide, fan-shaped seating arrangement of concentric, curved pews and a floor which sloped downward toward a raised pulpit platform. Without traditional chancels and processional, long, wide center aisles were not needed. The pulpit, not an altar, was the auditorium's focal point.

At around the same time, many congregations adopted a new approach to providing religious education in Sunday schools. Pioneered in Akron, Ohio, and so known as the Akron plan, this was an orderly yet flexible system in which classrooms were connected to a central lecture hall—sometimes termed a multi-purpose room, in keeping with the plan's modular nature—via sliding or folding partitions. This allowed the rooms to be combined for large functions or closed

off for small-group studies tailored to different age groups.

Beginning in the 1880s, Akron plan Sunday school plans were frequently incorporated into the designs of auditorium-plan churches. In these cases, the Sunday school lecture hall typically opened to the auditorium, allowing it also to serve as an overflow seating space for the sanctuary. The term “Akron plan” is sometimes also used to refer to these hybrid Akron-auditorium churches.

The popularity of this plan facilitated an embrace of eclectic late-Victorian architectural styles, such as the Richardsonian Romanesque, for Protestant churches. Unlike the Gothic Revival traditionally used for conventional, symmetrical Christian churches, the Romanesque provided a common

architectural language with secular buildings, promoting a new, public role for evangelical religion.¹ The appearance of an Akron plan church is distinctive and usually asymmetrical. The main entrance to the auditorium is typically through a tall corner tower, while a secondary entrance is marked by a shorter tower positioned between the auditorium and the Sunday school.

Angelique Bamberg is an independent historic preservation consultant, instructor in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh, and author of *Chatham Village: Pittsburgh's Garden City*.

¹ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107.