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Introduction

The First English Lutheran Church (FELC) located on James Street in Syracuse, NY was dedicated on November 26, 1911. It was the permanent home for a congregation founded in 1879 as the first Lutheran congregation in Syracuse to use the English language for all preaching and teaching. Local architect Archimedes Russell designed the church in the Mission Style. It was granted National Register status in 1999, thus facilitating funding for detailed documentation and renovations of the church building.

Reverend Craig Herrick submitted a request for design assistance from the Faculty of Landscape Architecture through the Center for Community Design Research (CCDR). He requested assistance as part of a studio project with elements of strategic planning and visioning. Rev. Herrick wished to examine the potential to create an urban park in the open space at the corner of Townsend Street and James Street, with special attention focused on the use of this space for contemplation, quiet reflection and rest. He also wanted the space to become a safe place that was easy to maintain.

The thirty-two students of the third year design studio led by professors Kathy Stribley, Robin Hoffman, and Anthony Miller undertook this service-learning project during a seven-week period in the spring semester of 2003.

Service learning allows students to participate in the learning process beyond the bounds of the ESF campus and benefits both the students and the community engaged in the project. In this project, the FELC receives a greater understanding of their site, and the range of opportunities available to them. The Landscape Architecture students received a greater understanding of the existing site uses and conditions, and were given a chance to apply their skills in programming, designing, and materials exploration.
Project Process

After an introduction by Professor Kathy Stribley at the first studio meeting for the project on February 17, 2003, Maren King of the CCDR introduced students to community participation methods and workshop activities. Christine Capella-Peters, a landscape architect with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, presented students a background on Archimedes Russell, and discussed National Register standards and restrictions relating to the church. On Friday February 21, 2003 students completed a site walk with Mr. Tom Mitchell, a church member. He introduced the site to the students and relayed information about recent renovations and improvements made to the church. He also began to outline some concerns.

At a workshop on Sunday, February 23, 2003 in the church hall after the main service, church members were introduced to the site design project and shared information about existing conditions, concerns, and opportunities with the students. Church volunteers prepared a meal, which allowed church members and students to informally meet and talk. The 40 church members that attended the workshop, and the 32 students divided into six groups seated around long tables. At each table, were an aerial photo and a site plan that the students and church members could reference when asking questions and sharing information. This was an informal but productive way of gathering information. The church members were able to tell stories, talk about problems, and things they would like to see changed, improved or provided on the site. After the group dialogues were completed, each table was asked to come up with something important the site has to offer, a major concern they have, and lastly something they would like to change.

Students organized and summarized the information shared during the workshop. Based on their analysis of clergy and church member concerns, ideas, and existing site conditions, students prepared programs that guided the remainder of their design process.
An interim presentation attended by the pastor, associate pastor, and two faculty members took place two weeks after the workshop. This review gave the students a chance to revise and refine their designs before moving on to the next step of the project, which included details, materials, and a model.

On April 7, a final review open to the church community was held at the church. The pastor, associate pastor, and five other community members participated in the presentation. This review included brief presentations of projects by three students to assist the church members in understanding the design process, and to introduce them to the types of elements they were going to see in the various designs.

Each church member was asked to review five specific projects ensuring that each student received comments. The church members were instructed to write comments on separate index cards, positive comments on pink cards, and concerns on blue cards. After reviewing the five designs assigned to them, participants listed three elements or ideas they really wanted to see happen at the church site. This critique gave the church members the opportunity to talk directly with students, ask questions, and make comments.

**PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

**Workshop Findings**
The workshop that was held on February 23, 2003 resulted in the sharing of information between the church members and the students. This information was essential for the students to complete their inventory, analysis, and program.

General Comments:
- This is an urban congregation drawing from all over Syracuse and even Onondaga County.
The church is in a transitional stage; new excitement is needed, something to attract people to it.

The front doors are mainly used in the summer months to enter the church; year round use is required.

Church members value the daylight in the basement since removal of the yews that once blocked the windows.

People like being able to park near the church.

Pedestrians often cut through the lawn area at the corner.

The corner area has previously been fenced off with a snow fence for a children’s play area.

James Street was formerly lined with massive Elm trees that died off from Dutch elm disease.

Important characteristics that should be maintained:

- Spiritually welcoming.
- Compatible with the historical nature of the church.
- Simple and easy to maintain.
- Visible and clearly identifiable entrances.
- Attractive and available for general use.

Concerns:

- Parking lot safety.
- Unclear, potentially hazardous entrances to church offices.
- How to make site welcoming to people.
- Pedestrian access from parking lot to building entrances.
- Safety of all users, especially children.
- Physical connections to the church.

Changes:

- Safe access to clearly marked entrances.
- Pedestrian circulation through site.
- Dynamic through all seasons.
Site Inventory And Analysis

During site inventory and analysis, information about natural and cultural factors is gathered and documented. This information is analyzed based on possible program requirements and accepted standards to identify opportunities and constraints. Information on existing site conditions was gathered by on-site observation, discussions at the meeting with church members, and in subsequent email correspondence with the pastor. See Figure 1 for an example of an existing site inventory.

The FELC site is located on the corner of James Street and Townsend Street, two minutes drive from downtown Syracuse. The surrounding land use is primarily commercial, including a laundromat, a private social club, and professional offices, with some residential apartment buildings. Most of the land area directly adjacent to the church is surface parking.

Although each student developed their own site analysis, following is a summary of findings organized by major site spaces associated with the church. See Figure 2 for the location of spaces.

A. The main church entrance is where the church members would like to have people enter the church year round, to experience the beautiful view of both the ceiling and the altar. During the winter months, church members use the closest entrance to their cars. Universal access cannot be provided at the main entrance due to a difference in elevation between the sidewalk and the sanctuary, but is provided at the office entry where a lift is located. Currently there are yews framing the entrance that are in poor condition.
B. The **front and corner green space** is the most visible area on the site from James Street and Townsend Street. A building was formerly located on this space, the foundation of which serves as a dry well to collect water from the roof of the church. Several trees are haphazardly placed and block views to the stained glass windows. Recently shrubs were removed from the southwest side of the building, which allows light into the basement of the church. The Austrian Pines on the southeast side block views to the church but also screen the parking lot behind them. The entrance to the church offices is unclear and needs to be visible. There are desire lines in the lawn area from people cutting across; these indicate an opportunity to redesign the flow of pedestrian traffic through the site. This area of the site is relatively flat, which raises concerns about the drainage.

C. The **rear parking area** has an entrance drive from Townsend Street and is located directly behind the church. There are a total of 27 parking spaces including handicap spaces and several double loaded spaces west of the church. This area is totally devoted to parking and driveway. Existing catch basins are set in exaggerated depressions. Their location in the church’s shadow contributes to the development of hazardous ice conditions in the winter months.

D. **The rear church entrance** is the entrance used by most church members during the non-summer months, and is one of the entrances to the church offices and classrooms. Currently there is no sidewalk or separation from the vehicular lane of the parking lot. This is extremely dangerous for people entering and exiting the building. During the winter months (when it is used most), there is danger of snow and ice falling from the roof.

E. The **Northeast parking lot** contains forty-five parking spaces, a dumpster, and the vehicular entrance/exit to Willow Street. The Willow Street entrance to the parking lot is very detached from the remainder of the site, has poor lighting, and is an area of loitering and illegal activity. This is also
where the food pantry tractor-trailer currently backs in to unload. Northeast of this parking lot is a parking lot that does not belong to the church. The two parking lots are separated by a strip of grass approximately three feet wide, which is often driven over.

**Programming**
Throughout the inventory and analysis stage, the students developed site programs. The program consists of elements that support or are necessary for the required or desired activities or functions to occur on the site. The program evolves through the early stages of the design process, becoming more refined through review and discussion between the design team and community members. Programming takes into account environmental requirements, spatial requirements, and design character. Some examples of program elements for the FELC are:
- Entrance Patio
- Water Features
- Vegetation
- Signage
- Pedestrian Pathways
- Dumpster Niche
- Contemplative Space
- Vehicular Entrances
- Community garden
- Seating
- Gathering Area
- Delivery Access
- Storage Facility

**Alternative Design Approaches**
Thirty-two students participated in this design studio, each coming up with solutions that responded in a variety of ways to the opportunities and challenges of the site, and the church members ideas and comments. Due to the number of the designs and the fact that every design is different, the church community may find consideration and evaluation of ideas challenging. To help in this process, the major types of improvements or changes have been identified, and different ways to approach or layout these improvements have been described.
Corner Green Space

Currently the corner is a lawn area with four existing trees and a sidewalk running along side of the church. Church members wanted to do something to this part of the site that would be attractive and draw people in to experience it. There were two general approaches to the layout of this area:

- Central focal element or space within larger corner green space.
- Interior green void of specific focal points but defined along edges with paving, planting, and/or structures.

Each of these different design alternatives had some type of corridor. These corridors acknowledged pedestrian circulation within this space of the site. The entrance to church offices is located within this corner space, which had two approaches that integrated it into the designs:

- Connecting walkway.
- Patio gathering space.

Both of these approaches clearly identified the office entrance, which was a concern raised during the workshop.
Vegetation was used with restraint in this area of the site to prevent blocking views to the cherished stained glass windows. Many students used various combinations of smaller shrubs and perennial gardens to maintain views. Church members appreciated the color that gardens would provide, but were concerned about maintenance. Some students did use trees to frame passing views of the church and provide an overhead canopy, which raised concerns about size at maturity and installation costs.

Currently, the church sign is located left of the front entrance; church members were interested in relocating the sign. Many students strategically incorporated the sign into the design so it was visible from both Townsend and James Streets. Church members appreciated the sign being extremely visible to the public.

Fountains were a common element in designs, but were very controversial. Church members thought fountains were a pleasant feature but were concerned about vandalism, maintenance, cleanliness, and insurance.

*Examples of interior green void of specific focal points but defined along edges design approaches.*
Rear Entrance and Parking

The two general approaches taken to address the issues at this space were to either include or eliminate parking northwest of the church. Each design alternative was approached in different ways:

Approaches that provided parking included:
- Reorganized parking spaces.
- Existing parking layout.

Approaches that eliminated parking included:
- Eliminated all vehicular access.
- Driveway through space.
- Drop off areas.

Students designed with safety as top priority. Therefore each approach had components that reduced conflict at the rear entrance, which caused a loss of parking spaces. Church members were pleased with the reconfiguration of parking and addition of sidewalks and planting beds, but were concerned about the loss of parking spaces.

This design is an example of an approach that provided reorganized parking. The addition of a canopy at the door, and sidewalk to the rear entrance would reduce pedestrian/vehicular conflict.

This design illustrates the removal of most parking behind the church for a driveway with a pedestrian drop off.

This design is an example of the approaches that completely eliminated parking behind the church. This also eliminates the conflict at the rear entrance.
Northeast Parking Lot
Currently this area of the parking lot is where the dumpster and forty-five parking spaces are located. Students handled this part of the site in two ways; they either kept the existing parking layout, or introduced a James Street entrance. James Street Entrance approaches included:
- One-way or two-way drives.
- Angled parking spaces, or
- Perpendicular parking spaces.

Students who provided a James Street entrance believed that this would provide easy access for the food pantry deliveries. Community members overwhelmingly appreciated this idea of adding another entrance to the parking lot.

*Design A, below kept the northeast parking lot similar to how it exists today. Design B, included a two-way James Street entrance to the parking lot with perpendicular parking. Design C included the one-way James Street entrance to the parking lot using angled parking. Design D is another example of design C’s approach.*
General Concerns
Based on the feedback from the church members that attended the final review, some design elements raised concerns. One of these concerns was seating. Church members thought that there should be adequate seating throughout the site but thought that it should not be placed in obviously public areas. There was also concern about the design of the benches; this is a place open to the public but should not provide accommodations for the homeless.

Several students included fences and walls in their designs, primarily to define or enclose spaces. Some church members expressed concern for the possibility of reducing visibility and creating hiding places for undesirable activities, and at least one church member felt that a fence might send the message to “keep out” when they wanted the site to be inviting.

These concerns and issues related to creating an inviting, restful, public space while reducing the potential for inappropriate and undesirable activities will need to be further studied and discussed in the next stages of the site design process.

Parking is another issue that will need to be further discussed. Students sought to satisfy the congregation’s requests for safe and welcoming access and the creation of an appropriate and attractive setting for the historic landmark church. In trying to accomplish these objectives, most students had a loss of parking spaces in their design. Church members will need to weigh their desire to maximize on-site parking against having space for other program elements desired on the site. A first step in this discussion would be to undertake a parking study to understand parking needs and explore alternative strategies to meet this demand.

The last major point of interest is that the design should enhance the wonderful architecture of the church and not challenge it. The landscape is a setting to this historically significant structure, but can also be used as a place for gathering and reflection.
Final Student Designs Used Throughout Report:

Design By: Rick Veno

Design By: Patrick J. Costello

Design By: Chad M. Wade

Design By: Kimberly Gerhart
First English Lutheran Church
Site Design Project

Design By: Joseph C. Falco
Design By: Jesse Winks
Design By: Jeff Romano
Design By: Robert L. Thompson