

St. Michael Catholic Community

"I hope that our new church will engender the same feelings of warmth, welcoming, heighten our feelings of spirituality, give comfort and security through the traditional symbols, provide a beautiful aesthetic, and in every way communicate that this is a church—a place of worship"

—St. Michael Parishioner



Wheaton, Illinois · Diocese of Joliet

On the fourth anniversary of the fire that destroyed this faith community's previous church in the early morning hours of March 18, 2002, St. Michael Church celebrated its inaugural mass on March 18, 2006 in its newly constructed worship space. Pastor Don McLaughlin and St. Michael Building Committee members commissioned RuckPate to use our participatory approach to involve parishioners in creating a common vision for the new church and surrounding spaces. The architecture of the new St. Michael Church was guided and inspired by the heartfelt statements of the parishioners who generously shared their ideas and thoughts through surveys, workshops and dialogue with design team members. The arrangement and styling of the building's exterior and interior reflect the strongly held beliefs of the St. Michael Community.



Many spoke of their desire for the church to be more prominent in the Wheaton community with a more traditionally-inspired design that would accommodate contemporary worship styles. These ideas became the central focus of the design. Forms of the building make a bold statement, with main entries that offer a clear welcome and invitation to the major approaches. The central nave is strongly evident from the east, west, and south, reinforced by the new bell tower. The tower's details are drawn from motifs present in the original school. The architecture incorporates historically familiar forms, arching windows, and details in a contemporary geometry that responds to the unique traffic flows and character of the neighborhood.

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The gathering space begins the journey and preparation for worship. Its inviting, light filled high ceilings lead to the low ceilinged connection to the nave. The east and west approaches, with more subdued lighting and colorful detailing, inspire quiet, contemplation, reverence, and anticipation. Four columns announce the ceremonial entrance to the nave, a turning in the path, and a turning of the spirit to worship. The nave entrance leads to the prominent central aisle and the dominant liturgical axis anchored by the baptismal font at the north and the altar at the south.



The lower ceiling of the ambulatory around the perimeter of the nave continues the anticipation of the higher central nave. Twelve major columns support the ceiling, hold the dedication crosses, and connect the ambulatory to the sanctuary at the south end of the nave. The rich but subdued colors of the ambulatory walls and columns enhance the colorful stations of the cross. The ambulatory embraces the fan shaped nave, gathering the community and focusing on the sanctuary and central crucifix. The ceilings at the east and west slope up to the vaulted central nave.

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Decorative arching beams lift the eye toward the center and create a rhythm of elements leading to the domed sanctuary. The beams are rich with color detailing. Stenciled medallions, symbolic and emblematic of the sword and shield of St. Michael, incorporate the colors and motifs of the architecture.



The sanctuary is defined by the raised altar platform, six historical round windows, and the semi-circular ribbed dome. A strong central focus on the marble altar is created by the central carved crucifix and its background reredos constructed of flamed Burlington stone.

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The low ceiling at the entrance defines the baptistry, and establishes the connection of the font to the adjacent reconciliation rooms. A traditionally inspired dome is centered over the font. A dynamic focus for the tabernacle is created in the space generated by four intersecting pointed arches to form a baldachino-like cover, visible from every part of the nave.



The tabernacle, sand-carved glass, and traditional wrought iron gate separate the prayer chapel located in the southwest corner from the main nave. The interior and exterior architecture are created through



the use of several familiar and historical motifs: pointed gothic arch (windows, statuary niches, reservation chapel, and pipe organ), flat arch (altar, ambo, font, stained glass, and stations of the cross), quatrefoil (altar, stained glass), intersecting wedding rings (speaker and mechanical grilles), rosette (interior trim details and bell tower), and intersecting arches (sand-carved glass, and wrought iron gate). The combination of form, richness of the color palette, and refined detailing achieve a space that is at once both warmly traditional and brightly contemporary.

The cooperative efforts, persistence and faith on the part of everyone involved toward developing St. Michael's new church resulted in exceptional parish- and community-wide support for the design and rebuilding effort. The fundraising necessary to support the project achieved over fifty percent participation to date.

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