St John in the Wilderness

INTRODUCTION

In order to develop planning tools for the future of St. John in the Wilderness, the Vestry and Building Committee recommended undertaking an "existing conditions survey" of the complex. Two parishioner architects and Crawford Engineers conducted visual inspections of the Church, the Rectory and the grounds in the winter and spring of 2017.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY for ARCHITECTURAL AREAS

The Church has asked us to summarize current conditions that should be addressed in order to bring the campus to a viable path for the future.

There are four areas of concern:

A. **Preservation and maintenance** of the exterior of the Church and Rectory;
B. **Code compliance** in terms of handicap accessibility and undercroft egress;
C. **Esthetic enhancement** and cosmetic upgrading of the church interior and
D. **Development** of a complex-wide parking and landscaping scheme.

CHURCH HISTORY

The Church of St. John in the Wilderness is an Episcopal parish founded by the owners of the Copake Iron Company. The Church, built in 1852, was designed by Richard Upjohn, notable architect of New York City's Trinity Church on Wall Street. His many churches were designed in the Gothic Revival style; this one is of particular interest as it illustrates the style in a wood vocabulary. St. John in the Wilderness is a wood frame building clad with board-and-batten siding (a 1992 replication of the original). The majority of the building (excluding the chancel) rests on a 1966 concrete block foundation to replace the original deteriorated stone foundation and introduce the undercroft space for community use.

The building itself consists of a four bay nave, an entrance narthex and an apse facing East. The West façade is enhanced with an open frame bell cote – reconstructed in 2014 -- on the steeply pitched gable roof (replaced in 2014).

The chancel is dominated by a triplet of simple lancet windows cut into the wall without molded surrounds. These are original. The gilt inscription around the chancel arch and the stenciling on the splayed inner surfaces of the window surrounds are not.

The interior of the Church is unadorned, featuring smooth plaster walls and minimal wood trim and moldings. Only one of the stained glass windows is original; the others date back to (1993?). Traditional is the center aisle plan and raised altar. The pews and altar furniture are all original, as designed by Upjohn.

The best summary by William Pierson Jr. is as follows: "As a work of architecture, the building is a masterpiece of distilled grace."

RECTORY HISTORY

Also designed by Upjohn, the Rectory was built in 1853. The main parsonage building consists of a two-story cottage-like building -- with the same board-and-batten wood sheathing as the Church and a jerkin-head roof. A single story office wing, an open exterior porch and a community room under the original rectory were all added in the early 1990's in a style compatible with the original.

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The Church was listed on the National Register for Historic Places in 1995. The complex is part of the Copake Iron Works Historic District since 2007.

Exterior of Building

The church dates back to 1852. The roof and bell tower were recently renovated. The 1992 exterior board-and-batten sheathing is in reasonable condition. Attention is needed at a number of locations, as follows:

Narthex meets main building: Flashing and roofing repair needed.

Entrance steps into Narthex. Partial repair and replacement of wood elements and flashing required.

Handicap access is hampered by steps into Church. While a removable metal ramp is available, a permanent solution should be studied. One option is to build a ramp in front of the Church, which would require changes to the parking and driving areas; another is to introduce a new side door into the narthex, with ramp along the side of the church. This would also allow for an automatic door opening feature.

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Around the Church, deteriorated flashing meets the foundations at grade. Observation of water penetration – due to rain and melted snow—at the whole perimeter of the church. Consideration should be given to this condition, including:

1. Asphalt removal all around the church;
2. regrading as required (French drainage at some locations to be identified);
3. new landscaping enhancing water retention;
4. relocation of most of the parking away from the church.

The upper surround of the Church exterior walls need repair, partial replacement, scraping and painting.

Many doors and window trim areas need to be scraped and repainted. The sacristy door needs to be replaced.

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Recommendations for Church exterior:

1. Painting of all exterior trim (scraping and replacement as required);
2. Close survey of flashing and roofing over narthex and sacristy;
3. Replacement of sacristy exterior door and storm door;
4. New handicap access at entrance door;

Recommendations for grounds:

1. Removal of asphalt surrounding perimeter of the Church; regrading to divert rain water -- from upper level next to cemetery and area next to the rectory -- from entering Church basement; introduction of landscaping enhancing water retention.

2. At South of Church, replacement of railroad-tie barrier between current parking and steep slope; removal of obsolete poles and debris; striping of handicap parking;

3. New parking area at mid level flat area between entrance road and church complex, with only limited handicap parking adjacent to the church;

4. Regrading as required to divert rain water -- from upper level next to cemetery and area next to the rectory -- from entering Church basement;

5. Repainting of cast-iron fence at cemetery.

Recommendations for Church interior:

1. Selective repair and repainting of pews;
2. Wall painting, including chair rail;
3. Wood floor refinishing and new carpet for central aisle, nave and sacristy;
4. Wall and ceiling replacement in sacristy, with new insulation throughout. New closets and counters.
5. New upholstery of pew cushions; new kneelers if deemed necessary.
6. Review options to ameliorate awkward communion delivery, with priest and acolyte going up and down steps and circumventing podium.
7. Code compliant exiting options from Cellar “undercroft” space need to be further studied. (One option is to add a spring-loaded opening device – either fusible link or via connection to smoke detectors-- at existing or modified “Bilco” door).
8. Exit signage should be introduced.
9. Storage of materials in the path of exit from mechanical room should be removed.

Recommendations for Rectory:

1. Selective repair and painting of whole exterior.
2. Replacement of office door and exit door from exit stair;
3. Whole exit stair should be rebuilt from the inside, with proper insulation.
4. Survey of flashing and roofs over small extensions.