

Submission to March 2023 St. Peter's Cathedral newsletter by Patty Dean

Honesty in design and materials, the use of local building materials, and hand-made architectural components and furnishings exemplify the primary values of the Arts and Crafts movement and were in Spokane architect Harold C. Whitehouse's 1930 designs for the St. Peter's Church. Described by him to be in the "early English style of Gothic architecture", the new church was sited on a gentle slope and north of the only building on the block, the 1918 YWCA building.

While some architects might have sought to level or backfill the site Whitehouse, following the "honesty in design" precept, made use of this natural contour, inserting the Parish Hall and kitchen into the basement level into the slope and directly under the street level entry of the church itself. Not only did this design decision reduce construction costs but it also facilitated the installation of large, semi-transparent above ground windows to illuminate the room.

The building's plan was reminiscent of Whitehouse's 1915 design for Missoula's Church of the Holy Spirit with the church forming the primary mass and a wing at a right angle. In Helena, a three-story wing, including a basement level, jutted perpendicular from the church's north wall and was to contain the rector's study, women's guild hall, and other church departments.

One of St. Peter's most intriguing exterior features is where the stone of the church building proper joins with the common bond brick north wing, a picturesque transition illustrating the Gothic Revival's "whimsical manifestation of a romantic impulse" as described by one Gothic studies scholar. Rather than a clean, linear break between the wing and the church proper, the latter's stone creeps into the surface of the former, encompassing a small window to the left of the recessed entrance before tapering off. Seemingly random short courses of brick punctuate the migrating stonework around the entrance and window, suggesting destruction and ruin—another favored Gothic conceit—leading some historians to erroneously theorize that the wing was rebuilt with brick after Helena's calamitous autumn 1935 earthquakes, but this is not the case. The transition is further emphasized with a cast iron tourelle or short tower for ventilation that was capped by an octagonal spire with grillwork, visually lightening its mass.

Another interesting exterior feature is the Indiana limestone-trimmed belfry with metal spire appended to the building's southwest corner. Whitehouse noted its prominent location would "...be more conspicuous coming from the south..." Equally important, the belfry provided a niche to accommodate the baptistry. The bell from the 1879 Warren Street church was installed in the belfry.

In his May 1930 proposal for the project, Whitehouse specified the exterior be constructed of the "...local red porphyry stone, which the architects have become very much in love with thinking that the stone has great possibilities of being laid up in many different ways." Quarried at T. C. Power's property near Montana City, the stone was actually the erosion-resistant rhyolitic breccia which comprised the Power Block, Diamond Block, the present GrandStreet Theatre as well as numerous residences in the West Side neighborhood. Helenans also referred to this stone as "Helena Brownstone" as the quarry was named and, mistakenly, as "red porphyry".

The brick, of a color complementary to the stone, was local, too, the product of the Western Clay Mfg. Co., now the site of the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts west of Spring Meadow Lake. The manufactory had long been renowned for its advanced technology and the uniformity and consistency of its brick and other clay products.

Whitehouse's interpretation of the Arts and Craft's Movement's values and sensibilities resonated with Reverend Daniels and the congregation and, at the February 11, 1931 meeting, the parish voted to employ him as architect for the new St. Peter's Church.



Photos by the author

The author thanks the experts on the Montana Geology Facebook page for their quick and clarifying explanations of the history of rhyolite breccia as a building material in Helena.