

Intro

I have been invited to continue our journey of examination together “discovering the Sacred through Art”, begun so well last week by Bill Kuttner’s exegesis on the rise and fall of our stained glass windows. We’ll visit the uplifting realm of the what about this building and this space becomes sacred. My thanks to Joy and to Faye Charpentier for unearthing a trove of relevant documents from the archive.

I plan to take us through some thoughts on

- transforming Holy Places into Sacred Spaces,
- recall examples from around the world with which you may be well-acquainted,
- discuss the sociological milieu in Boston giving rise to King’s Chapel in its various guises.

I’ll then go on to

- recall the first building, and its surviving elements,
- the program/commissioning of Benjamin Harrison, “America’s first Architect”, to replace it,
- Harrison’s background and the design origins of this Second King’s Chapel.

and finally take you on

1.- So... Holy Places / Religious Spaces

- all societies develop “holy”, mystical, special places that feel so unlike the everyday norm, that they must be set apart.
- springs, streams and rivers; mountains, hills, rocks, plains; caves and outcroppings,
- places where unusual, sometimes inexplicable, even “miraculous” things happen,
- places where rites of passage are performed, where wise men and women/shamans/priests get in touch with the deities of “the people”,
- places which are the sources of reflection, reverence, revelation and sometimes resolution.

Because all societies seem to need these places to which they can go to get “grounded”, to find again their essential nature, to reassert their relationship to “the world”, their own society, and perhaps their god (“by whatever name”), we have temples, shrines, churches.

In colonial Boston, it may have been under the Liberty Tree, for some today it may be Starbucks, in its day it certainly was the Delphic oracle, and personally -it may have been where we knelt by our childhood bed to say our prayers - but ultimately we transform our idea of these holy places into what becomes our own religious spaces. Where we go to be apart from the quotidian, to help us enter a special, more revelatory, perhaps more supportive, but certainly more enlightened consciousness.

2. Religious Spaces

Around the world you have travelled, or seen in pictures, religious spaces take many different forms, especially where there has been no clear separation between church and state, indeed where they were the same, these were very different from this space. But when you go to that location, these are the place you *must* go:

- in Athens - it’s the acropolis
- Cairo - the pyramids, where the pharaohs were the representatives of the gods
- Istanbul - Hagia Sofia, the biggest and most elegant dome of its time

- Rome - St. Peters, well maybe you go there after the Colosseum
- London - St. Paul's, after Parliament and the Tower
- Paris - Notre Dame, after the Eiffel Tower
- Venice - first stop: St Mark's square and cathedral
- Jerusalem - the Church of the Holy Sepulcher
- Kyoto - the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, with the idea of Mount Fuji always in the background
- Beijing - the Forbidden City (arguably, the Emperor was the god)
- Isfahan - the Maidan (Naghsh-e Jahan Square) and Imam mosque
- Tikal in Guatemala - the sacred precinct and Temple III at sunrise
- the Native American Burial Mounds - mostly in our Midwest and South
- and in southwestern England - Stonehenge, also at sunrise, when the new day starts.

Each of these places and spaces represents the sum of aspirational forces of a society. We humans are so similar. We all need our places of reflection, resource, authority and perhaps salvation.

3. BOSTON - A LIGHT COLONIAL REFRESHER

In 1630, Boston (originally called Trimountain) was founded by 700 Puritans in 11 boats fleeing religious persecution. Gov. Winthrop, for the Massachusetts Bay COMPANY - preached his famous "city on a hill" sermon, *before they departed*.

During the Colonial Period, the sons of the Puritans, increasingly made their own societal decisions collectively (Town Meeting was the form of government, with leaders elected from within the body of the whole - excepting women, of course, and those without land- the indentured). In this fairly independent Commonwealth, their church became the Congregationalists - where the *congregation* ruled.

The Anglican church, by contrast, was ruled by the King, as the head of the Church of England. Henry VIII had broken with Rome a century before, in 1534, over the private matter of a divorce.

But the Puritans were making a fairly good go of it.

Too good, refusing to pay taxes, tariffs and obey directives from London, becoming too independent on its own. So in 1684, about fifty years after it was granted, Charles II revoked the charter, making the The Massachusetts Bay Colony into a Royal Colony, run by the King's Governor, supported by Redcoats. The Anglican church quickly followed and was established here in 1686, 150 years after Henry VIII invented it - 56 years after Boston was founded

4. King's Chapel

The new congregation - government officials, military officers, and generally prosperous merchants, and others who were indeed loyal to the King, started small, but grew rapidly. They started where the Chamber of Deputies (recently dissolved) used to meet.

Rather quickly in the colony, we are told, there developed a tension between the royal governor and a rich merchant class who looked to him to maintain order and trade, and original Bostonians with their Puritan ideal of social cohesion (a class-less society) and self-governance.

The new Anglican church needed a new building of its own. It had co-opted use of the Old South Meeting House, at the foot of the School Street, forcing the Congregationalists to wait on Sunday until the Anglicans had finished their own morning service. One does not have much difficulty imagining that did not make locals very happy.

Trouble - no colonial townsman would sell the Anglicans any land, So the government had to build on the only public land it controlled (the graveyard). Some graves were moved, and in 1686 construction began on this very site, at the corner of Tremont and School Streets. It was dedicated three years later and lasted 61 years

Engravings from the period show a tower, with a crown as an integral part of the spire. Even though the building was a fairly modest wooden structure, it was an unofficial outpost of the King and Royal authority. Locals didn't like it much - church records show rather high expenses for replacing glass.

It was described in various histories as a "small and simple wooden structure". Inside there were wooden benches. Enclosing box pews came five years later, so that a family could sit around a portable warming stove.

But some of what is unique here, now - was built into that first church over time:

- the trappings of an elaborate Episcopal rite began to appear. The local were especially suspicious of a red silk pulpit cushion with tassels and gold braid trim.

- an organ - first church in US to use an organ, bequeathed by Thomas Brattle - 1713
The Puritans rejected music, believing that it distracted from "true" religious practice.

- notably this pulpit and sounding board from 1717 - described as a "wine glass" for its shape, built by French Huguenot, Peter Vintoneau. It appears to be the oldest pulpit still in use in America on its original site.

The city, the commercial and governmental center of the colony, was growing rapidly
In the thirty years from 1690 - a year after the *first* church was built - from a population of 7,000 until 1720, Boston had 12,000 souls, and with it grew the Anglican congregation
In fact, the congregation had grown too large. In 1723, a group split off to build Christ Church, which became the Old North Church. Galleries were added to the old church here in 1729, six years later, but didn't get the job done. Five years after that, another group split off to found Trinity Church on the old Filene's (now Primark) site in Downtown Crossing.

5. Second King's Chapel - this building

By 1742, Boston's population had grown another 50%, to over 16,000. This church was designed in 1749, and completed 5 years later, as the Queen's Chapel, since Queen Anne had acceded to the throne. That gave the Anglicans only 21 years in this space before the Revolution finally broke out.

Expanding the chapel needed more land. After quite a bit of wrangling, the Anglicans eventually made a deal to replace the original Boston Latin School built 50 years earlier (1704) by building the town a new brick school across the street (where the Parker House sits - there's a plaque), before expand down the hill.

By then the most distinguished men in Boston were members (Gov. Shirley, Apthorp, Hutchinson, Lechmere) but the subscription for the new building was faltering. After one false start, where Peter Faneuil died before he could fulfil his pledge, they did raise enough so that granite could start arriving on site even before the architect had been hired. But the fund-raising would not end so well.

Enter Peter Harrison.

6. Peter HARRISON, First colonial American “architect”
(1716–1775)

Born in York, England, of Quaker parents, Harrison, emigrated to Rhode Island in the 1740s with his older brother Joseph. There was no other distinguished “architect” on these shores for another 40 years. Harrison died just as the Revolution was starting.

Harrison was a self-made man of many talents, although some critics say that his in architecture were somewhat limited. In his basic biography, evaluated by some scholars as being somewhat sketchy, Carl Bridenbaugh’s *Peter Harrison, America’s First Architect*, Chapel Hill, 1949, summarizes the Harrison brothers’ prospects:

Lacking gentle birth, inherited lands, or wealth, they sought to make their way in commerce, in the good old eighteenth century fashion, always trusting that by a turn of fortune they might better themselves and rise in the social scale. That they were on the make, social climbers and fortune hunters, if you will, is the key to their careers.

As a crew member on his brother’s ship, Harrison visited Newport, RI, in about 1738, emigrating there in 1746, and marrying into the wealthy and prominent Pelham family when young Elizabeth was found to be carrying their child.

Peter Harrison became a sea captain himself at age 23, in the agriculture and rum trade trade. Before settling in Newport, he was captured by a French warship 1745, and for a time imprisoned in the fortress at Louisbourg, Nova Scotia. He got even by drawing plans of the fortress from memory, aiding in its later capture by a colonial expedition.

Bridenbaugh makes an impressive list of skills in which Harrison was competent: “ship handling, navigation, shipbuilding, woodcarving, drafting, cartography, surveying, military engineering and construction, commerce, and the new agriculture of the time.” He continues, “Harrison saw his architectural skills as a gentleman’s avocation, but one of great interest to him.”

Harrison assembled one of the finest architectural libraries in North America, catalogued also by Bridenbaugh, which was lost, along with all of his drawings and designs shortly after his death in 1775, when zealots burned his office in New Haven to which he had moved in 1766 to become Collector of Customs.

To discuss the origins of Harrison’s design, I need to backtrack to London to a hundred years before the Revolution. The Great Fire of 1666 (*sixteen sixty six*), an overwhelming disaster, among other things, destroyed 90 parish churches which had been the local center of every neighborhood of the city. Rebuilding these churches provided the necessity for the extraordinary growth of a generation of unparalleled English architects who produced the English Baroque: Vanbrugh, Hawksmoor, Gibbs and above all, Sir Christopher Wren. Wren himself was responsible for the design and rebuilding of

50 of these churches - think of it - *fifty* urban churches with which to develop and refine your knowledge of Palladio and his antecedents, Vitruvius and Vignola.

Harrison's architectural training remains a mystery. He spent quite a bit of time in London, back and forth on trading missions. The story that he was a pupil of Vanbrugh is impossible, since that distinguished architect died in 1726, when Harrison was only ten.

But there is no doubt that Harrison was firmly planted in the evolving Palladian movement which evolved into the "classical" Georgian style (technically designated as the era beginning with the accession of King George I in 1714 - two years *before* Harrison's birth - and continuing through the Hanoverian monarchs ending with George IV, in 1830 (forty years *after* the establishment of the United States). Harrison indeed set much of the pattern for our "Colonial Architecture," that being defined as what originates in the mother country of the colonial people, who then adapt it to their own needs.

I am much indebted to papers delivered to King's Chapel by parishioner/architect Jim McNeely in 1990 and '91 on Harrison and the design of this church. He quotes from Vincent Scully (eminent Yale architectural historian) in *American Architecture and Urbanism*, 1988, on the matter of "pattern books", on which builders and craftsmen depended so much:

(Harrison's) dependence upon English example is only part of the story. He uses the English Palladian architects...(in his first building) the Redwood Library (Newport, RI, 1748), but his strange scale ...is lumbering, big in detail...his intention is so heroic, in a building so small, that a new and primitive force is felt.

Harrison's own King's Chapel is the other most striking example of English-colonial proto-classicism, with its ponderous mass, large-scaled masonry, and heavy colonnade. Stern duty and classical learning directed, as here, Boston's try for excellence, the toughest and most sustained that the United States was to know. The United States was born out of it.

And then Scully goes on to note what happened in Boston immediately after the Revolution:

But what was New England classicism directly *after* the Revolution? It is found in the work of Charles Bulfinch and Samuel McIntyre, in a delicately attenuated decorative style derived from Robert Adam. Weight and mass have wholly disappeared; here middle-class energies were fixed for the moment upon the graceful proliferation of multi-shaped interior spaces and closed exterior surfaces elegantly inscribed. The heroic mood that made the Revolution has been dissipated...Bulfinch's architecture, though clear and luminous, is affluently inflated and institutional, perhaps an exact embodiment of Federalist New England.

While Scully's evaluation has the "ring of truth" to me, it does not explain how Harrison's boldness came serving the Anglican Royalists, rather than the self-determining Colonists, from whom one might have expected such vitality. Of course, it was the Anglican Royalists who had most of the money and were holding on desperately to all of the power.

Harrison also has his detractors. Listen to Williams College history professor, William H. Pierson in *American Building and Their Architects*, Doubleday, 1942, again quoted in McNeely's paper:

There is something quite wrong with Harrison's scheme (for the interior of King's Chapel). Because the main portion of the ceiling is flat and set off from the groin vaults in the lateral galleries by a bordering cornice, it seems to press down into the space of the room and therefore lacks altogether the lofty suspended quality of Gibb's design (for St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, which Harrison used his model).

Pierson continues

Moreover, except for the coupled Corinthian columns, the rest of Harrison's interior is relatively unadorned; thus the columns, in all their classical elegance, stand out in large and isolated splendor. Even though the columns were copied with great care from one of Gibb's books, their effect is overpowering and excessively ornate...Throughout his career, (Harrison's) work remained a pattern-book architecture, an indecisive miscellany of skillfully rendered quotations whose rigid adherence to source left no room for (vigorous personal statements.) - *McNeely's consolidated conclusion*.

This rebuke is answered in Hugh Morrison's *Early American Architecture*, Oxford University Press 1952, (McNeely's manuscript):

The portico, and those designed for (two others in the South) were the only full height classical porticos designed for churches in the colonies. The projecting stone tower...was intended to carry a lofty spire, more elaborate *than any in London*. (italics mine)...

Morrison goes on to say:

The interior of of King's Chapel is without question the finest of Georgian church architecture in the colonies...Harrison was working with more freedom and assurance than he had in the Redwood Library. There is an easy mastery of space composition, a sophisticated handling of the fine carved details of the Georgian vocabulary, and, in particular, a sure sense for true grandeur of scale, which had been lacking in his first work.

That "Adaptations" of designs by great architects of history was Harrison's *forte*, rather than "original" designs, should not lessen our appreciation of his achievements. Architects have always, even today, built upon the work of those who came before - learning from them, some pushing the boundaries a little, or in Harrison's case, rather more than that.

We have still to address the critical missing element - the steeple.

In his covering letter transmitted with the six drawings submitted to the King's Chapel Building Committee in 1749, Harrison wrote:

"The body of the building (as you directed) is as plain as the Order of it will possible admit of, but the Steeple is fully decorated, and I believe will have a beautiful effect. The interior is likewise designed plain, as regular as can be contrived from the dimensions you limited me to." (a little snarky, I think).

And then Harrison gets even a little more patronizing:

"From these hints you may perhaps be able to to answer the Objections of such of the Committee and others who may not be conversant with Drawings, or have not a Taste in Things on this Nature."

The plain and somewhat crude stone of the base makes a good deal more sense, when seen as a foil for the elaborate tower. Conjectural designs attached.

How did Harrison get the commission?

Easy - Harrison was the only one around, or at least the most gifted amateur in the Colonies, and he had married into the class of decision-makers who would find him. In his letter of invitation, then rector Henry Caner, himself the son of a famous carpenter-architect, drew a first rough plan.

Fee? What was he paid?

Nothing - directly.

"Gentleman architects" were not plying a trade, or exercising a craft they were sharing their knowledge with their fellow- gentlemen of the society.

If you have read David Macaulay's wondrous *Cathedral*, or Ken Follett's *Pillars of the Earth*, or visited the medieval towns and cities of Europe, you have some idea of how the "architect" in those societies worked.

Not a gentleman, the early "architect" was a master builder. Not ensconced in an elegant study making drawings, he was in the workshops day after day, for years (perhaps the rest of his life), with his craftsmen, working things out, sketching in wet plaster, developing the details, the construction techniques (quarrying, hoists, materials), as well as explaining to his "clients" (church fathers, merchant guilds, the local noblemen) his ideas and how he would realize them, how he would source the materials, and how much it all would cost.

In Harrison's day (as in Wren's day a century before), realization was left largely to the craftsmen and to the sponsoring entity, who would "hire out" various pieces of the work, to follow the drawings of the architect. That is why we know the name of sculptor in wood, William Burdick, whose workshop and apprentices carved our elegant Corinthian capitals and other "decorations" in 1758. I hope you have all seen the basic adze-hewn column, later clad with these elegant flutings, revealed in the front pew.

King's Chapel was the first use of granite for building in Boston. Although that became a norm for serious edifices, it was a disaster for the finances of this church. The granite took too long to quarry, was too difficult to transport and was hard to put in place, and hence caused the exhaustion of funds before the church could be finished.

Ultimately the portico had to be built in wood, which still gives us problems today, and the steeple was never built. While many see the unfinished tower as a suitable metaphor for our unfinished quest for God, or perfection, or whatever, it would have given King's Chapel the most magnificent structure in Boston, (as well as requiring a huge annual maintenance budget). It should be noted that it is not unusual for architects to misjudge the resources of their clients.

But the church construction went on, and when the famous dismantling of the original structure ("thrown out through the new windows") needed to be done, the congregation accepted the invitation from Trinity Church in 1753, to worship with them, until their new church was complete.

There is one more story I want to share with physical structure. In the 1840s, it was proposed to follow the then-current trend of relocating the pulpit to the *center* of the chancel. You see it in many Baptist, Methodist, and other American churches built in the 19th Century. But the Rev. Francis W. P. Greenwood, our minister at the time would have none of it. He minced no words in opposing this suggestion: "The most honorable portion of the church," he said "is allotted to the *communion table*,

as the symbol of Christian faith and fellowship.” He also said he hoped to see a cross in the church, still controversial within Unitarian precincts, but this did happen 1875.

There is so much more that we could discuss, but we’re out of time, so that will have to wait until next week’s class (joke):

- a visual tour of the building and this sanctuary,
- pointing out some things you may not have noticed,
- discuss mood, lighting, theater and presentation in the liturgy,
- and suggest what it is about this place that keeps you coming back.

I’d love to try to answer your questions, and to have us discuss together the things you think add - or detract - from the success of our church as a Sacred Space.

Thank you for listening.

(spire drawings follow)

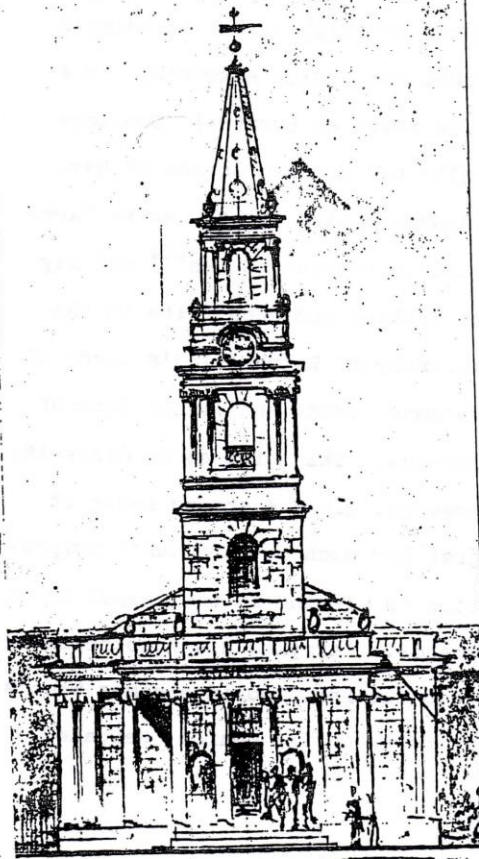
Sketches for King's Chapel spire.

The original drawings no longer exist.

These are scholarly projections, based on similar churches with which Harrison was likely conversant, and on a written document, researched by Prof John Coolidge, of the inventory of stone carved for it..



Above: Halfpenny's design for Holy Trinity church at Leeds. Professor Coolidge notes it as the most important Georgian church in the part of Yorkshire where Harrison grew up.



Right: A. Lawrence Kocher's reconstruction of Harrison's design for the spire of King's Chapel (from Professor Coolidge's article)

Bulfinch, a vestryman,³³ to the Chapel's design had a connection existed.

The unbuilt spire is part of the subject of John Coolidge's ingenious speculation based on an inventory of freestone parts once projected for use in the Chapel by Ralph Allen of Prior Park, Bath.

[Given Peter Harrison's Tom Jones-like early life, the entry upon the scene of Ralph Allen, Fielding's model for Squire Allworthy, is a nice twist of events.] Coolidge calls his reconstruction of Harrison's design for the spire "awkward in several places"³⁴ and may be putting too much faith in the accuracy of Ralph Allen's count of columns, urns, and linear feet of cornice. The spire as he draws it, however, gives a strong sense of just how much of Harrison's composition is missing in the Chapel as it stands. Carrying his hypothesis one step further, Coolidge names Wren's spire on Christ Church, Newgate

