

Program Summary:

A postmodernist religious structure is renovated to support a new health collective with services that promote wellness and spaces that inspire.

Program Statement:

The Norwegian's Seaman's Church has been a mainstay of the Lower Garden District in New Orleans since its construction more than 50 years ago. First constructed to serve the Nordic Seamen for gospel as well as Norwegian-inspired recreation, the facility evolved in recent years to serve a more secular purpose as the Scandinavian Jazz Church and Cultural Center. When the building came up for sale in 2018, a group of local women saw promise in the airy Scandinavian architecture to house the health collective they had long envisioned would fill a need for wellness services in the local community. While certain areas of the building required extensive renovation to modernize and address the needs of the planned service offerings, the iconic Chapel was ideal for the open lectures, classes and events that would be critical to the community outreach aspects of the center's programming. In addition to meeting the objective needs for the project, the architects were tasked with bringing new architectural identity to the project while respecting and highlighting the valuable historic features that set the building apart from other historical architecture within the city. Design moves needed to be humble but deliberate, light touches that created cohesion throughout the complex linking the extensive architecture with the new brand identity of the health collective.

RR- 45.01

Building Area: (sf)
11,450

Cost per Square Foot:
\$300

Construction Cost
\$3,435,000

Date of Completion:
July 2021



RR- 45.02

A LANDMARK BUILDING

The Norwegian Seaman's Church was designed in 1967 by N.E. Hansen and is a rare example of postmodernist religious architecture within the context of New Orleans.

The historic building has many architectural features that helped land it on the National Register of Historic Places and qualify for both State and Federal Tax Credits. The original buildings include the Chapel and a two-story administrative and recreation volume that are joined via a central meeting room. The buildings enclose an internal courtyard that was further defined by a single-story annex building added in 2003.

Given the historical significance of the property – very few modifications were permitted to the facades visible from the street, the exception being a new awning on the two-story volume to highlight the new primary entrance to the facility.

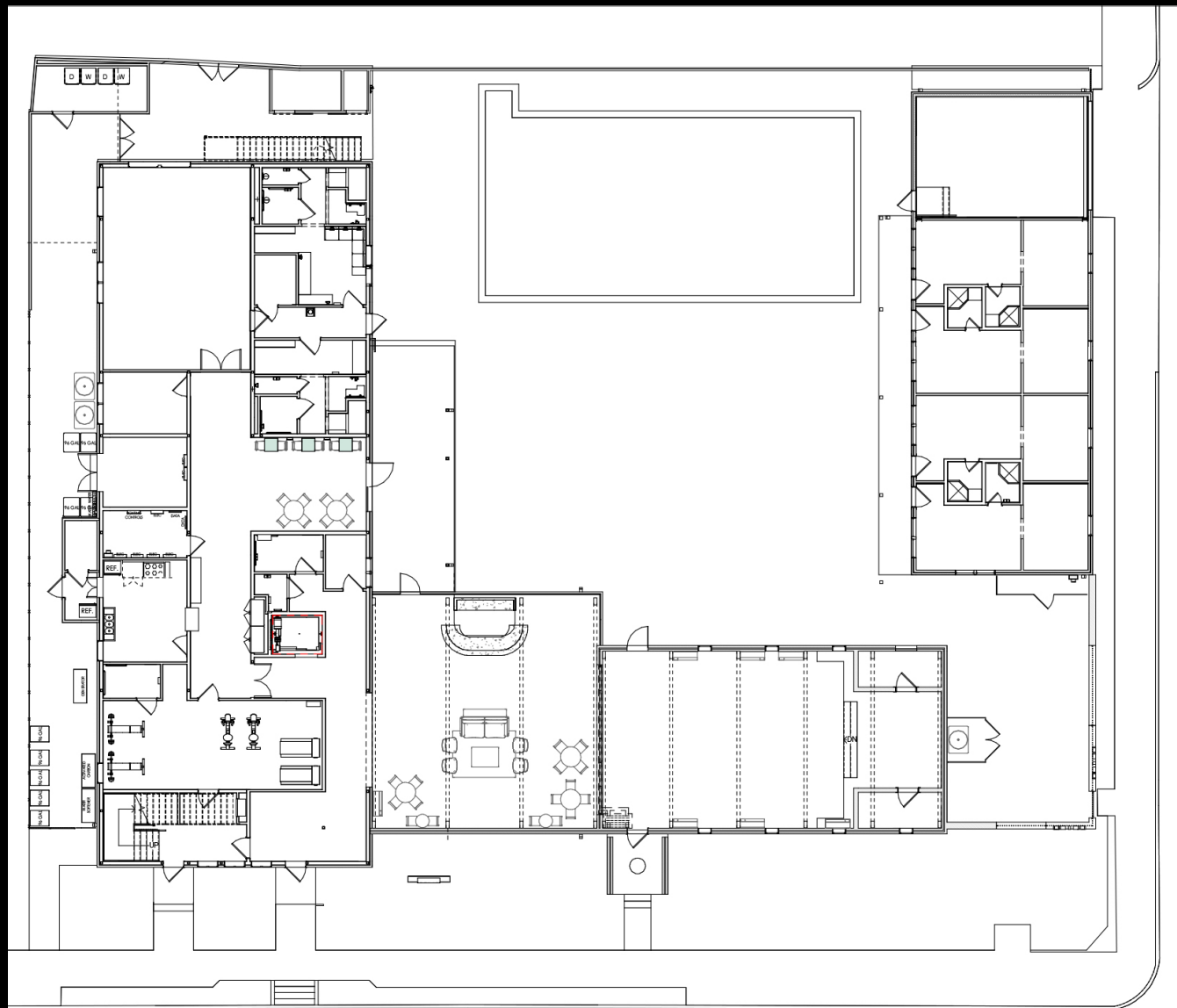
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SACRED GEOMETRY

The exaggerated proportions of the chapel volume roof which are evident on the exterior are even more profound on the interior where the proportions combined with the timber construction hint at vernacular Norwegian forms.

With the renovation project, the original stage and altar were modified to expand the open floor area and new flooring was installed throughout. The most impactful move by the design team was to revert to indirect lighting of the space by installing adjustable LED grazers in the chevron clad coves at the perimeter walls that cast a glow on the full surface of the simple but dramatic roof plane. Several hanging pendants were removed throughout the chapel and a large cylindrical pendant was added that suspends via nearly invisible cable over the stage.





RR- 45.04

FLOOR PLAN

One of the original entrances to the two-story building was maintained as the primary building entrance with visitors ushered directly towards the historic meeting room that now acts as a lobby. The general configuration of the buildings was maintained with the administrative wing modified to support the buildings use as a health collective with a focus on holistic wellness practices. The program includes a small gym, infrared sauna, dry float tank, locker rooms, a café and fitness studio. The lobby and Chapel are the nucleus of the project with new architectural glazing creating expansive views of the courtyard and unifying the complex.



RR- 45.05

A WELCOMING LOBBY

The lobby maintains the original architectural features of the meeting room. The timber elements remain exposed and interior brick left unpainted, but the lighting is more simplified and intentional.

The new reception desk embraces curvilinear forms and terrazzo surfaces that were prevalent in the era of the buildings design and is sleek and durable enough to perform double duty for light food service during events.

The most impactful architectural move within the lobby is the replacement of punched aluminum framed openings to the courtyard with a frameless glass system, including the removal of a solid masonry wall sections to achieve a butt glazed corner beyond the timber post-and-lintel structure. This lightening of the wall assembly helps emphasize the weight of the original timber components and their ability to withstand the structural loads.





RR- 45.06

PLANNED FLEXIBILITY

One criterion for the new use of the building was that the Chapel be utilized for private lectures and classes that would benefit from a visual and acoustical separation from the main lobby.

The existing opening contained a lightweight accordion operable wall system. Given that the Chapel historically remained open to the meeting room, it was clear to the design team that an acoustically performing operable wall system would be the most sensitive replacement. The operable wall system also allows the lobby to open to the chapel when private events are not underway or when the event being held benefits from the expanded footprint of the two adjoined spaces.





RR- 45.07

WATER MANAGEMENT

Given the scale of the renovation, the project was required to comply with new stormwater regulations that require the facility to retain or detain as well as filter the first 1.25" of stormwater runoff during each rain event and limit the post-development runoff rate. As such, the courtyard was redesigned to act as a retention zone with layers of gravel and sediment installed below new landscaping and pervious hardscaping. A grass labyrinth and small fire pit conceal the engineering feat of the retention system and ensure the outdoor space performs an integral role in the offerings of the larger complex.



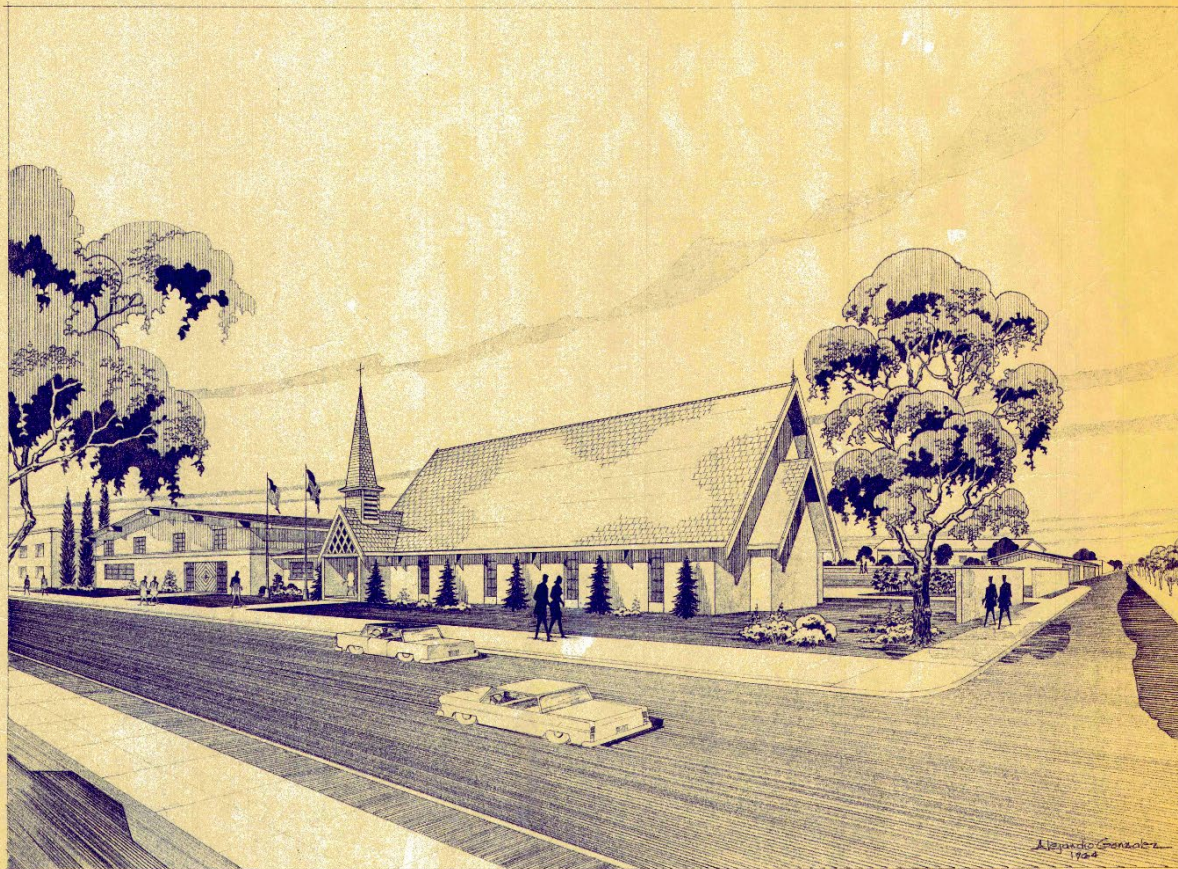
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MODERN INTERVENTION

A more obvious intervention is visible at the second floor of the two-story wing where the balcony was enclosed using a glazing system that runs continuous behind the historic balcony railing. This shift increased the square footage of the building, allowing for double loaded practitioner offices at the second level. It also dramatically modernized the look of the building without compromising the integrity of the original design. A slight shift in the width of the chevron pattern on the balcony railings brought a new sophistication to the chevron motif, a design element that is visible in moments through the buildings.



NORWEGIAN SEAMEN'S CHURCH



NORSKE SJØMANNSKIRKEN

NEW ORLEANS

RR- 45.09

HISTORIC DRAWINGS

The architect was fortunate to have access to the existing drawings of the original construction to utilize as a resource throughout the design process including structural drawings, critical wall sections and window schedules. These were utilized as part of a bank of research included in the nomination for National Register that was undertaken by the design team and helped assist in the rehabilitation tax credit application process when determining how to preserve or restore the existing architectural features.

RR- 45.10

PUBLIC SPACES

Other new amenities located within the complex were not overlooked for their design potential, including a small seating area for the new café that occupies the original intact catering kitchen. Tambour wainscot and a soft curve to ceiling edges show how new design moves and languages can exist within a historic context. Whereas the prior rooms and circulation within the two-story wing were primarily functional in design, the new spaces that unfold as you move through the building stand alone as individual moments within larger palette of a cohesive interior design response.



RR- 45.11

PRIVATE SPACES

The new locker rooms were not excluded from the larger interior design effort and are intended to be comfortable and inviting spaces rather than the sterile spaces typically found in health or fitness centric facilities. The stack bond format of the wall and floor tile relates to the original restroom's square mosaic tile motifs but takes on a more organic or natural identity that is consistent with the goals of the new collective. The historic aluminum awning style windows of the original construction were maintained throughout, in this instance providing a clerestory that brings both natural light and the option for ventilation into the new locker room arrangement.





RR- 45.12

SALTWATER POOL

The original pool was resurfaced but otherwise left intact and serves for both recreational and fitness driven uses for the new facility. Visible in this image is the frameless glass meeting room wall in the new lobby as well as the infilled balcony at the upper level, two architectural interventions that dramatically alter the feel of the space without compromising the historic integrity of the original architecture.



RR- 45.13

AN ICONIC RETREAT

The project is an excellent example of the potential inherent in historic structures and specifically postmodernist buildings which are only recently appreciated in the world of historic preservation and adaptive reuse. The renovation brought new life to the building with sensitive architectural interventions including modern glazing, millwork, and lighting. The effort that was put towards a respectful and purposeful renovation ensures that the building will continue to be utilized as a community gathering space for many years to come.