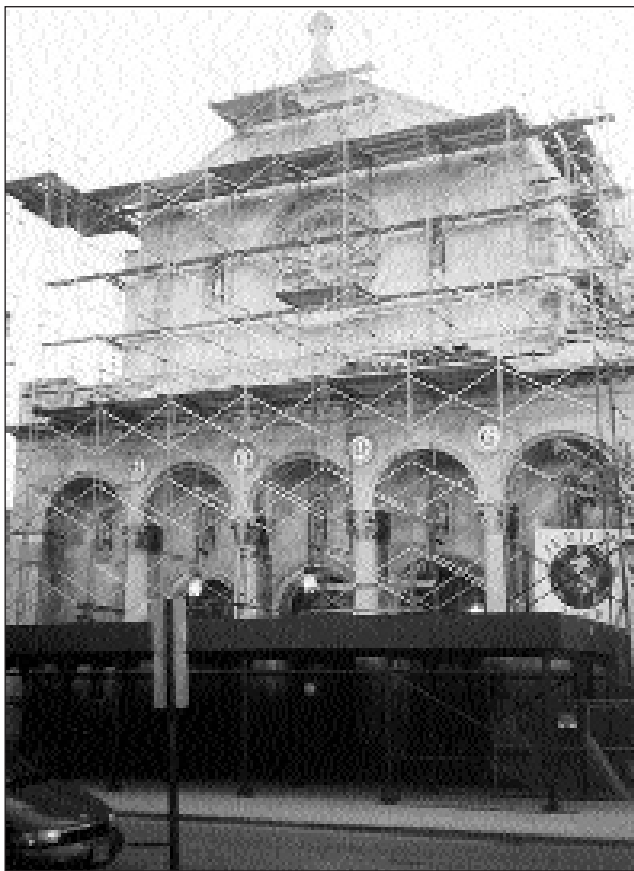


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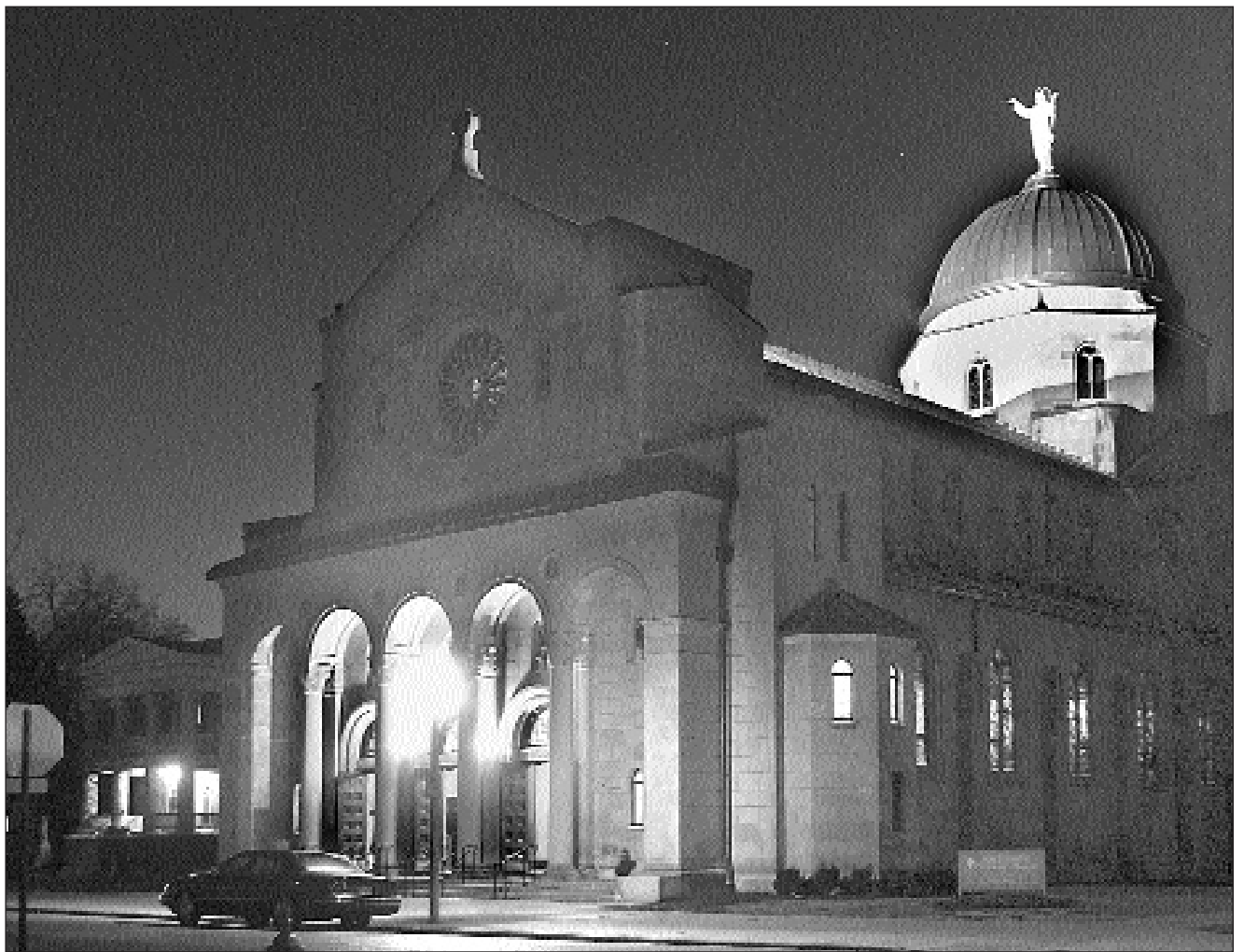
Call Homefront Editor
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**IN WITH THE OLD,
IN WITH THE NEW**
Condo combines classic style
with modern amenities.
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PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASCENSION CHURCH

PRESERVING HISTORY, *one project at a time*



WEDNESDAY JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

Before and after: *The extensive renovations at Ascension Church, and the rehab of its 1912 school, merited a 2003 Historic Preservation Award from the Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission. Work on the church included roofing, copper flashing, recovering the copper dome, exterior stonework, lighting, rewiring, and temporary repair of the rose window.*

Drive down any street in Oak Park, and you're likely to find something under construction. A large dumpster may mark the site of a tear-off roof, major rehab, or new addition to one of our many old homes or buildings.

Much of that work enhances and preserves the distinctive character of Oak Park's architecture. Some doesn't. To promote the first kind, the Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission reviews building permits in the village's historic districts. The commission also recognizes exemplary work with Historic Preservation Awards.

Ascension Church receives 2003 Historic Preservation Award

By **LINDA DOWNING MILLER**

The commission recently honored 15 Oak Park homes and businesses with its 2003 awards. The properties range from Ascension Church, which underwent nearly \$4 million in work over a five-year period, to a modest home on Marion Court, which sports a new roof, front porch, and

working windows.

Award winning properties in prior years include the Ernest Hemingway Home, the 700 block of Belleforte Avenue (its brick street), Pilgrim Congregational Church, and the Frank Lloyd Wright Home & Studio.

Nominations come to the commission from property owners, architects, contractors, and others.

"Anyone can submit an application. They don't even have to be involved with [the property]," explained Doug Kaarre, an urban planner with the village who provides

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staff support to the 11-member volunteer commission. "The commission also nominates properties based on the projects they've seen over the year. [The awards] are recognition for a job well done."

They also help educate citizens about historic preservation, Kaarre noted. Standards for rehabilitation set out by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior guide the decision-making process. Those standards focus on preserving the distinctive materials, features, spaces and craftsmanship of the past.

Oak Park's commission makes awards in four categories: restoration, rehabilitation, addition and adaptive use, which represents the most significant change in the function of a structure.

Ascension Church, at 801 S. East Ave., received three awards in two different categories in 2003.

A gleaming new exterior

Perhaps the most visible work at Ascension for most Oak Parkers took place on the church's exterior, which the commission recognized with a restoration award. Ascension's recovered dome now gleams with shiny copper, underneath a statue of Jesus Christ that years ago developed a green patina.

Over time, the surface of the dome will age to match the figure above it. In the meantime, the dome no longer leaks, and neither do the 30,000 new terra cotta tiles on the church roof, supported by rebuilt woodwork.

Ascension Church was built in 1929 and designed by architects Meyer and Cook. Ragnar Benson oversaw the design of the recent renovations, and Ward Construction served as the primary contractor.

In addition to performing work on the church dome and roof, the contractor replaced copper gutters and downspouts, removed and re-set a large, stained-glass nativity window, tuck pointed all the exterior stonework, and replaced many cracking blocks of stone. The east parapet received particular attention.

"The front of the church had been leaning forward," said Tom Gull, Ascension's busi-



Coming out of the dark: Ascension School's dark wooden lockers, dark paneling and carpeted floors have been replaced by white walls, metal lockers, new floors, new windows and lots of new lights. At left, the old third floor hall. At right, the new second floor hall.

2003 Historic Preservation Awards

The Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission awarded 2003 Historic Preservation Awards, in four categories (two properties won in two categories), to the owners of these properties. The winners are:

Rehabilitation

Modifying a structure to a functional condition through alteration or addition using materials compatible in scale, color, texture and character to the original.

Oak Park and River Forest High School stadium, 605 Lake St., District 200, owner.

511 N. Grove Ave., Carole Powers Lauck, owner.

6533 North Ave., Televent, William Steed and Donald Shannon, owners.

224 Marion Ct., Charles Moelter and Peter Thomas, owners.

1020 Chicago Ave., honorable mention, S. Ryan Construction, owner.

Restoration

Returning a structure or a significant part of the original design and condition by repairing or replacing the original material, architectural detail or paint color scheme.

213 N. Taylor Ave., Colleen Moroney Maia, owner.

116 N. Oak Park Ave., James and Noreen Bushouse, owners.

516 Augusta Street, Dan Garvey, owner.

Restoration/Rehabilitation

Unity Temple, 875 Lake St., Unitarian Universalist Congregation/Unity Temple Restoration Foundation, owners.

Ascension Church and School, 801 S. East Ave./601 Van Buren St., Ascension Church, owner.

Addition

Enhancing the historic nature of an original building with an addition directly to a structure, or with new construction on the property.

925 Chicago Ave., Halina Staszewska, owner.

626 Linden Ave., Michael and Linda Caprile, owners.

636 Linden Ave., Brian and Yasmina Duwe, owners.

Dole Library, 255 Augusta St., Village of Oak Park, owner.

Adaptive re-use

Changing the use of a structure to meet contemporary needs in a manner that retains its viability while respecting its original character.

136 N. Ridgeland Ave., The Baronger Group, owner.

—Laura Stuart

ness manager.

The contractor dismantled and rebuilt all of the parapet's stonework, which sits above the church's prominent, circular rose window. The window itself received temporary repairs.

"Right now, we're looking for funds to make a major repair ... actually take it out and rebuild it," Gull said.

The restoration of the church exterior began in the fall of 2000 and was completed in the spring of 2001 at a cost of \$1.4 million. During that time, the building was essentially surrounded by scaffolding—a challenge for the parishioners, particularly those holding weddings or other special ceremonies at the church, said Gull.

An historic school with modern amenities

Before the exterior restoration, Ascension School underwent \$2.5 million of rehabilitation work during the summers of 1998 and 1999. This work, recognized by the commission with a rehabilitation award, represented an even more dramatic trans-

formation for the 470 students and their teachers.

A walk through the school now reveals a bright and light interior: white walls and ceilings, metal lockers, new floors, and rooms with ceiling fans, new windows and screens.

Before the work, Ascension's students walked halls lined with dark wooden lockers, dark paneling and carpeted floors. Three art glass windows on the north side of the building, part of the main building since its construction in 1912, were essentially lost in the gloom. After the work, people marveled at the "new" beautiful windows.

"It really has been the difference between night and day," said Associate Pastor C. J. Franklin.

Students and teachers used to enter the school through solid doors. "Now they're all half glass," noted Gull. "It's a much more welcoming sight. It doesn't look like a forbidding place."

Less noticeable but equally significant are updated electrical and plumbing systems, fiber optic cable for Internet access,

new fire doors, and a central fire alarm and smoke detection system. These are the kinds of necessary modifications that illustrate the difference between a "restoration" and a "rehabilitation."

"When the school was built, many classrooms had only one electrical outlet," explained Gull. "Things needed to meet the technological needs of a school building, and codes in Oak Park had changed."

Perhaps even more noteworthy, this work was completed during two summers. The first summer, the second floor of the main school building was renovated in only 47 work days.

"They were able to gut and rebuild an entire floor of a school in less time than it can take to do an Oak Park kitchen," commented Gull. "It was an amazing feat of coordination and teamwork."

A few of the teachers actually cried when they returned to start the school year and saw the striking improvements, Gull remembered.

Work also uncovered a large mural hidden under wallpaper. The mural depicts Jesus surrounded by Catholic and public school children. In the background is an image of Ascension.

"The mural was done at the time by a pretty noted artist," said Gull.

To recognize the increased diversity of Ascension's congregation (the faces in the mural are all Caucasian), the church installed two banners on each side, one "remembering the faces of yesterday" and one "celebrating the faces of today."

A serene, green landscape

The final piece of Ascension's award-winning work was the restoration of its exterior gardens and lawns. Hoy Landscaping completed this effort, which required the church to raise an additional \$45,000.

"All of the shrubs had been planted around the 1950s. They were pretty large and overgrown. It all had to be removed for the scaffolding around the church," said Gull.

One particular tree, planted in memory

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASCENSION CHURCH

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of a teacher at Ascension, was relocated. The move uncovered a small monument, which had been hidden before the project began.

On its north lawn, the church added a meditation area, with two stone benches and a statue of St. Francis. Gast Monuments created the statue, which was selected and donated by a 90-year-old parishioner, Mildred McDonald. The statue was dedicated on June 29.

"When I go by, I often see a person or two sitting out there," said Gull. "At lunch, one or two students [might be] out there. Grammar school kids need some peace and quiet sometimes, too."

A long planning and fundraising effort

Approximately 1,800 families are registered members of Ascension, "but as is typical in many churches, about 42 percent actually contribute financially," explained Gull.

That means about 650 families raised the entire \$4 million Ascension needed for all three projects.

"We held two capital campaigns, back to back," said Gull. "No one ever thought we could finish a successful one and do another one right away, but we hadn't had one in 50 years. It was up to the current members to bring [the facilities] to where they needed to be. It was a sense of pride for the whole parish to be able to raise these funds and get this work done."

Ascension could not begin the work with-

out the involvement and authorization of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

"The Catholic Bishop of Chicago is the legal owner of the property," explained Franklin. "We have been entrusted with the stewardship."

The planning process took more than a year. A volunteer maintenance committee, including the church pastor, school principal and other users, helped identify and direct the renovation needs. Committees also

worked on the capital campaigns.

The Archdiocese, in turn, provided loans to initiate the work and referred contractors with whom they had good experience.

Work at Ascension is ongoing. The first floor of the main school building, used as a meeting space and lunch room, is now being updated. Volunteers on the maintenance committee are currently removing old carpet inside the church to reveal beautiful, colorful terrazzo floors.

"Our problems are the same as the average Oak Park homeowner, only bigger," said Franklin. "For a long period of time, the buildings did not receive the attention they needed. We're making up for several decades of neglect and looking toward a better, brighter, healthier future for our buildings and the occupants."

Next week: more Historic Preservation Award winners



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASCENSION CHURCH

Up, up and away: *The restoration of Ascension Church's exterior took well over a year, cost \$1.4 million and required the building to be surrounded by scaffolding. Workers attend to the old masonry on the east wall, left, and climb up the scaffolding, right, during the project.*