

project

Constructing Faith

# Grace Methodist Church

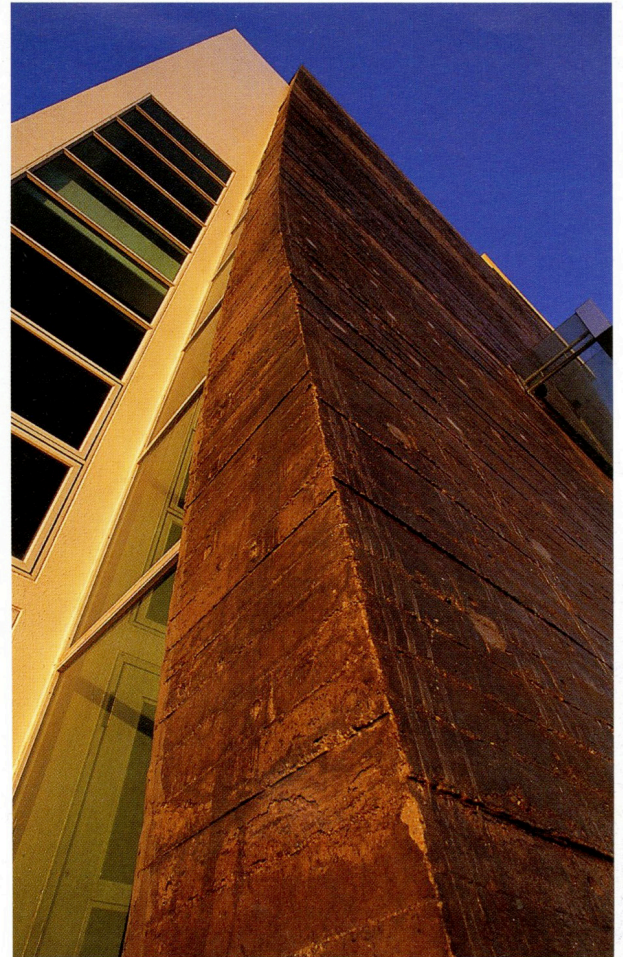
Architect: Architects Vista

by Chee Li Lian



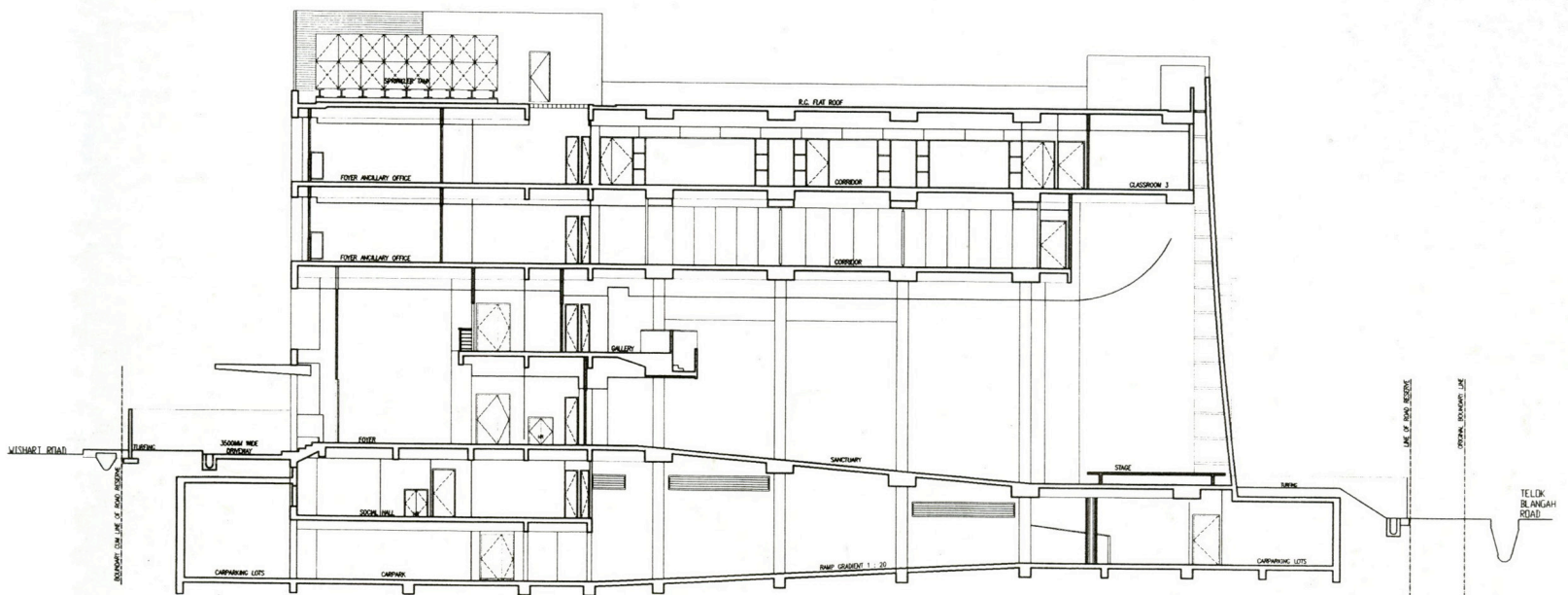
In our increasingly secular world, the making of sacred space is becoming extremely challenging for it is not only material matters that shake our faith. The question of what constitutes liturgical space is interesting because it is an effort to encapsulate and to promote this notion of faith. It is one that this article wishes to explore. Also, with the changing trend in religion (namely Christianity), gospel dissemination no longer centres completely on the clergy, this responsibility being shifted in part to the congregation. Such change undoubtedly brings about a duality to the architecture of faith since it must now address the congregation as a community and yet perceptibly ensure that the presence of God is not subdued nor denied.

Nonetheless, these are only two major issues that the Grace Methodist Church at Telok Blangah Road must hope to respond to. To construe that church design merely revolves around these parameters is being simplistic. One must in fact, review the agenda of the architect and how his well made plans fit metaphorically and physically within God's larger plan. No matter how small the church may be, such responsibility remains large. The church is a typology that constantly baffles man, challenging him to exercise his creativity to make space that speaks not of his intentions alone, but more importantly of the sacred.



**Opposite: The elevation to Telok Blangah Road signifies a spiritual space of refuge.**

**Right: No entry is offered through the massive concrete wall. Instead entry is delayed thereby increasing the mystical power and powerful presence of the cross.**



**Section**



### Perceiving Spirituality: The Skin of Religion

The space of religion in Grace Methodist Church is elusive. Designed by Architects Vista under the leadership of Mr Fong Hoo Cheong, the church is a bright spark that transcends the neighbourhood in which it stands. From Telok Blangah Road, it is austere and minimal. Strategic articulation emphasises the essential symbolism of its architecture: a rough hewn off-form concrete wall that is left unrendered. The wall's spiritual power is undeniable. Engendering the central expression of the Christian faith which comes in the form of a surprisingly oversized crucifix of stainless steel, the wall does two things: signaling at once towards a spiritual space of refuge, yet offering no entry into the sanctuary through its massive diaphragm. Visitors and worshippers are made to enter through the rear end of the church. Even if this is merely a direct response to the traffic pattern, it is nevertheless an ingenious one. In one move, the design manages to delay the entry into the sanctuary, thereby increasing the mystical and powerful presence of the cross that continues to beckon at first sight.

The grounds are extremely tight. Yet, a remarkable programme has been accommodated: two basements housing the carpark on the lower level and a social hall for fellowship on the upper basement, and, three full storeys above these. From the main road, the wall unfurls outwards as it rolls down to touch a grassy mound raised to meet it. This gesture is subtle but effective, recalling a parchment that bends gently to reveal the contents it protects. Besides the wall, hints of the modern

**Above: The cross is the focus of the interior but its drama is compromised by a projector screen and musical instruments that reside tentatively in the vicinity.**

box that lurks behind is controlled and sparse. On one side, an exposed staircase with projecting landings encircle a pale ochre wall that rises beyond the wall to end as a frame. It recalls a bell tower through an equivocated elaboration of the historical form, its emptiness emphasizing an elusive spirituality. Balancing this on the other is a strip of vertical openings. These elements preside without disturbing the dominance of the rough in-situ wall. Again, the game of hide-and-seek is coyly played to reinforce the elusiveness of the sanctuary from prying eyes.

As one turns the corner parallel to Morse Road, the vocabulary unravels. Here the architects have been consistent with the layering effect exercised on the in-situ concrete wall. From that wall, the transition to the smooth and pristine white box is well maneuvered. The white wall now acts as the outer skin within which an inner box is wedged. Articulated through receding planes, a play of colours (the pale ochre now used to mark the inner box), and deliberate apertures, the effect notable but not overdone. The detachment of the white box from its inner contents is made most pronounced at the junction of Morse Road and Wishart Road, allowing the reading of the two masses to be verified once one approaches the entry into the church. This gesture, more than the porch that projects, emphatically announces the real entrance. A very tiny porte cochere leads to a double volume foyer that flows into the church proper.

Space has to be creatively used and planned in this church. There is very little to begin with. Yet, the architects

have done commendably. By locating the main entrance at the rear on Wishart Road, it becomes possible to appropriate the space from the exterior towards the foyer thereby extending this communal zone with unexpected richness of variety and informality. On crowded morning services, the community spills outwards into this borrowed space shaded now by a cluster of matured trees. Quite unlike the front where the sloping concrete wall distills the numinous, the openness of this facade celebrates the community. It is a clever balance that does not compromise the ascetic quality of the church.

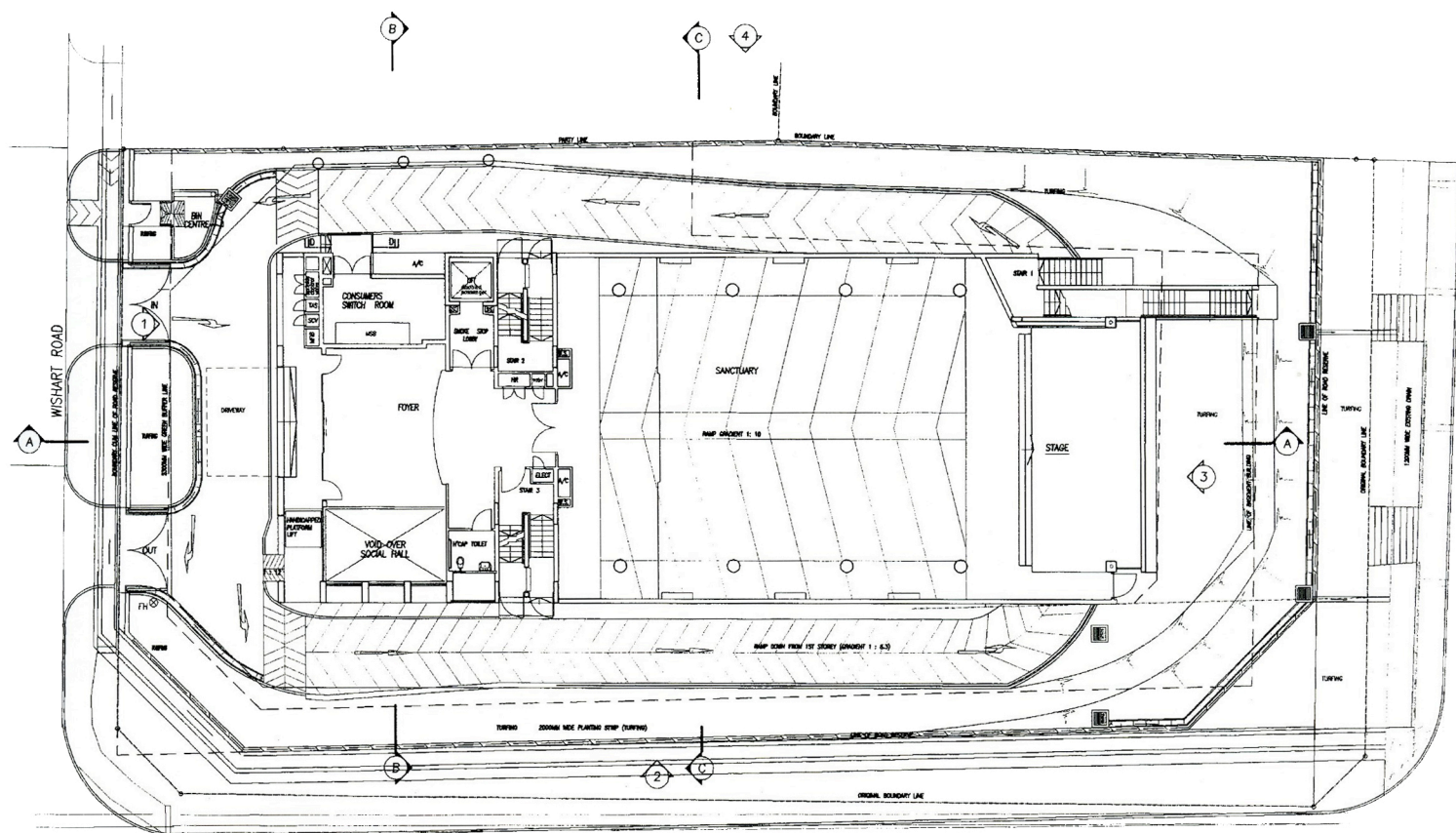
Connected to this foyer is the social hall on the second basement that is partially double volume for spatial linkages and to channel much needed light into the basement. This hall is well used on Sundays for fellowship after service and on other days serve as a resource area with an expanding collection of Christian literature.

### Higher Communion: Space of Religion

One enters the sanctuary from the first storey foyer passing through a space flanked by two vertical circulation cores. This transitional space, carved no doubt with intention to prepare one for the inner sanctum, is not particularly successful. Yet, one must be aware that there is very little room for the architects to produce a processional movement towards the sanctuary. As one's anticipation has been swelling in preparation for the spiritual space, one may be a trifle disappointed as one enters the worship hall.

Perhaps it is the author's own preconceived perception of what a sacred space should feel yet there seems to be a missing link between what is intended and what is experienced. The numinous cross is still there at the end of the axis but it is no longer the solitary foci. Silence, solitude, time and the omnipotent are qualities that are seething to be present. Yet in this instance, the drama of construction is not so easily silenced into matter and space. There are reasons, many of which lie beyond the prerogative of the designers.

Natural light filters in only at the cross, whose sides are in glass. More light was originally admitted through high level light troughs along the sides of the sanctuary's high walls. Unfortunately, these were sealed after the congregation complained of discomfort due to heat. The altar area which was intentionally spartan and pivotal only upon the cross, is now cluttered by a projector screen that resides tentatively in this vicinity. Perhaps, what is missing here is an understanding of the use of such religious spaces by this Christian denomination. The Methodists privileges fellowship between its church members and one of the way in which fellowship is promoted is through the singing of hymns. There is a wide repertoire and many require seeing the lyrics to join in the singing. It is also a denomination where the eucharistic celebration is shared as a responsibility between clergy and congregation. Hence, instruments that allow this sharing of liturgical knowledge for example, the screen and the projector become crucial appendages for such a denomination. The architects have taken pains to



First Storey Plan

MORSE ROAD

TELOK BLANGAH ROAD



conceal the projector within the ceiling and to allow it to be lowered when necessary but the overlooked screen presents some problems. Also, it becomes a challenge for the architects to handle the marriage of an ancient space of repose with electronic gadgets (audio-visual equipment mostly) that newer churches are acquiring. Fortunately these have been quietly ushered to the gallery space overlooking the sanctum.

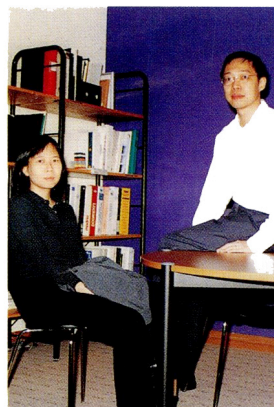
Aside, one wonders if it is possible to critically re-look at the design of these churches. Their designs have been evolving, perhaps incorrectly, on the Roman Catholic churches that practise stricter traditional rituals. That these denominations themselves present a different array of contexts as parameters makes the chosen archetype quite questionable.

Then, there is the architects' agenda. The high ceiling is curved with recessed troughs of artificial light. Along the bare and high walls are paired columns leading one to the altar. There are also many ambitions at the altar. The architects tell that the use of the rough in-situ wall casting a searing contrast on the smooth plaster surfaces is analogous to the honesty of one whose foci is God. Their strategy is to present the aperture in the wall as a narrow slit to which the "passage to God" is likened. The richness of this interpretation is disrupted as the ceiling scoops down to cover too much of the crucifix. The same wall now loses its dominance through its decrease in scale and is reduced to a mere backdrop. It is clear that there is an intention to be minimal yet it is the sum of the small things that distracts one from the frozen beauty of this space. Perhaps it is also the nature of the church's denomination that complicates the programme, with its desire for so many things in equal priorities: at once a need for solitude and also for fellowship within the same space. These requirements perhaps, may serve as important new parameters for future typologies to be tested and to thrive.

In comparison, the agenda of space, proportion and language is well explored and refined on the second and third storeys. Here, the design has a degree of unwavering control carried from fundamental space planning right down to the smaller details. Planning is simple, sensible and highly effective with the functional spaces of offices and classrooms enjoying natural light, drawn from the shorter edges of the building. The common corridor as a spine between the classrooms on its two sides, (this is only on the third storey as the second storey has a large open plan with moveable partitions) is also indirectly lit by clerestory openings above the fixed walls of these classrooms. Even in such small spaces, care has gone into articulating these not merely as enclosed rooms but more as vertically partitioned areas where corners are dematerialised through the introduction of glass planes with horizontal fins.

**Opposite: The use of the rough hewn wall contrasting with smooth plaster elsewhere is analogous to the honesty of one whose focus is God.**

**Bottom: Fong Hoo Cheong and Michelle Chan, Architects Vista**



## Amazing Grace: Meaningful Materiality

Eschewing ecclesiastical form, the Grace Methodist Church has succeeded in distilling the numinous and in becoming an effective converging point for the community. In architectural terms, the architects have also woven some magic into a very tight and difficult site. The greatest success perhaps lies in the many ways this church has brought people together in its religious context. Firstly, in intellectual terms, it is interesting that the precedence of the church as a public realm goes back to medieval origins where holy space is the centre of one's world. The architecture has somewhat wrestled with this idea, though not entirely successfully but nevertheless commendable. Secondly, the architects have juxtaposed the architectural brief with religious metaphors. The bridging of these two incongruous subjects yields a dynamic tension that allow for an intensity of meaning and intention to be realised and to resound in the final work. It is in engaging the order of these ideas that this church, more than in its structure or construction, derives its strength.

The project also suggests that there is possibly a route between what is ethereal and what is material and that the medium that so ably bridges these contrasting points can only be one that moves the spirit and provides meaningful experiences. As Le Corbusier pointed out so clearly,

*"The architect, by his arrangement of form realises an order which is a pure creation of his spirit. By forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree, and provokes plastic emotions. By the relationships which he creates he wakes in us profound echoes. He gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world. He determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty."*

Fortunately, architecture in its most powerful instances is still capable of doing just that.

Chee Li Lian graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1997 with the Degree of Bachelor of Architecture with Honours. She was awarded the Lee Kuan Yew Gold Medal, the Singapore Institute of Architects Medal and the Board of Architects Prize and Gold Medal. She worked for one year with DP Architects Pte Ltd. before joining the staff of the School of Architecture.

<b>Project Data</b>	
<b>Architect</b>	Architects Vista
<b>Architectural Team</b>	Fong Hoo Cheong Michelle Chan He Lei
<b>Consulting Engineers</b>	Kinhill Singapore
<b>Quantity Surveyor</b>	WT Partnership
<b>Main Contractor</b>	Interpro Construction
<b>Gross Floor Area</b>	4353.72 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Site Area</b>	1813.75 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Plot Ratio</b>	0.53
<b>No. of worshippers</b>	300 persons
<b>Project duration</b>	(from Design to Completion stage) Oct 1995 - Apr 1998.
<b>Budget</b>	\$5.5 millions (incl. of piling works)