

Brookline

Let there be nondenominational light

From a Brookline studio, designs for a N.H. church

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On a sunny winter afternoon in Exeter, N.H., the fading daylight illuminates blues and greens in the new stained-glass window of the Phillips Church. The colors give the window a three-dimensional effect, as they swirl into a dramatic red that bursts across the 15-by-20-foot piece.

"I felt I knew this place," the window's designer, Michelle Honig-Szwarc, says of the church, while sitting in her Brookline studio. "I felt I knew what needs to go in there."

Designed by Ralph Adams Cram, who also did Boston's Trinity Church, the Phillips Church was built in 1897, and sheet glass was installed in the window overlooking Tan Lane.

"The story is they ran out of money for stained glass," says the Rev. Jamie Hamilton, chair of the religious department at Phillips Exeter Academy and a member of the church's restoration committee.

When the committee formed in 1998, it decided that the restored church needed to reflect the diversity of the contemporary student

body. "We want the church to be open to all," says Hamilton. "All of us have religious lives, whether we're atheist or not."

Last month, the school celebrated the reopening of the nondenominational church with Islamic prayers, Buddhist meditation, Hindu puja, Jewish shabbat, and various Christian services. The restoration's hallmark piece, the Tan Lane window, required a design that was open to all denominations.

Honig-Szwarc's modern design, which includes no religious symbols, is a work of merging colors and lines.

"What I imagined," she explains in her artist's statement about the piece, "was light emerging from the very back reaches of time, flowing through all that has come before us, illuminating the present, transforming it, and being transformed by it, and continuing into eternity."

When the committee opened an international window design competition in 1999, Honig-Szwarc, who has restored buildings over 1,500 years old in her native Israel, was working as one of the primary architects on the restoration. She decided to enter.

"I hadn't designed a stained-glass window before," says Honig-Szwarc. "But I'm an architect. I'm used to working with steel, with glass."

Over 30 designs were submitted for the

contest, all kept anonymous until three finalists were selected. Honig-Szwarc says that when her name was revealed, "Everybody fell off their chairs!"

After Herzog-Szwarc's final design was completed in March 2001, the Lyn Hovey Studio of Boston, which restored the church's other windows, got to work building the complex piece. About 2,500 pieces of glass were used.

"All the techniques used we've used in other jobs, but never all in one window," says Karen Rosado, the project manager. "To achieve the range of colors demanded by the design, the window is made up of three to five layers of glass pieces, most of which were etched with acid to create more color tones. Rosado also used an epoxying technique, typically used in stained-glass restoration, to glue different colored pieces together. Installation of the heavy window was completed in November with the help of specially made bronze support bars.

"I was almost sad to see it go," says Rosado. But Herzog-Szwarc is already working on new projects with the Lyn Hovey Studio. Since being commissioned to do the Tan Lane window, she started her own art and architecture business, Honig-Szwarc Studio, with her husband. The 36-year-old works from her home, which was the first space she designed unrelated to restoration since moving to Brookline from Israel in 1998.



Designer Michelle Honig-Szwarc with the new stained-glass window of the Phillips Church in Exeter, N.H.