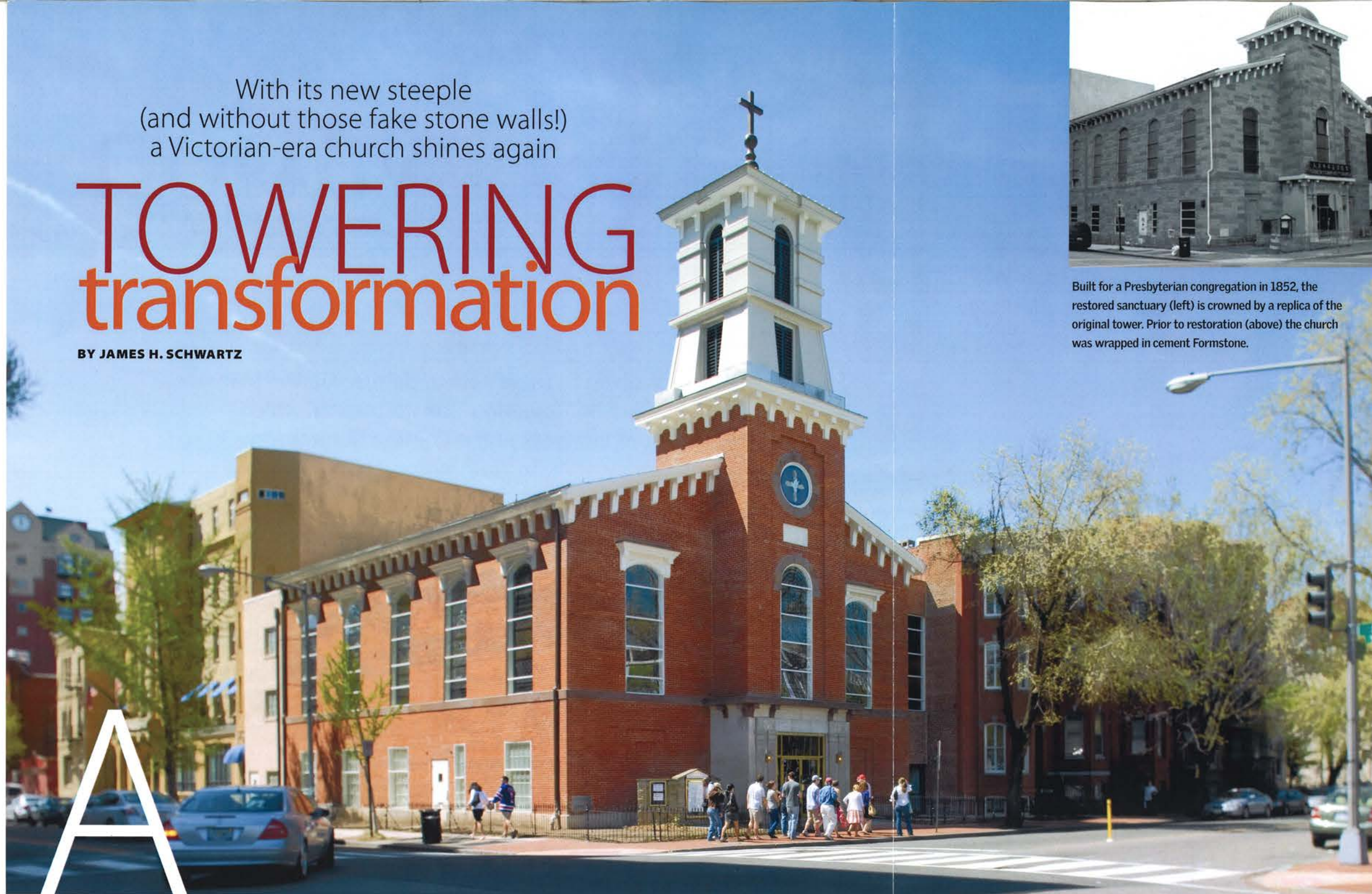


With its new steeple
(and without those fake stone walls!)
a Victorian-era church shines again

TOWERING transformation

BY JAMES H. SCHWARTZ



Built for a Presbyterian congregation in 1852, the restored sanctuary (left) is crowned by a replica of the original tower. Prior to restoration (above) the church was wrapped in cement Formstone.

A few years ago, visitors walking the 10 blocks from Capitol Hill to Washington's Chinatown passed a small, nondescript church at the corner of Fifth and I streets NW. Fully encased in gray-ing Formstone and oddly capped by a painted metal dome, the Chinese Community Church appeared to hold little architectural interest or any historical significance.

But this is Washington, where there's almost always a hidden tale if you peek under the covers. And beneath that false

exterior, below the wood frame of the meager dome, stood a forgotten 1852 gem of a building that researchers have now attributed to Thomas U. Walter, Architect of the U.S. Capitol.

Emily Eig, whose architectural history and preservation consulting firm, EHT Tracerics, researched the history of the church, says Walter lived in Washington while designing additions for the Capitol. "We learned from one of his diary entries that in August of 1852 he lent a set of drawings and specifica-

tions to a Presbyterian congregation," she says. One month later the cornerstone for the Fifth Presbyterian Church was laid at 500 I Street, and the *Christian Observer* newspaper credited the design to "Thos. U. Walter, Esq., architect of the Extension of the Capitol." Eig was ecstatic with the revelations: "It's not often that you find an unknown Thomas U. Walter building."

Equipped with Eig's research, a collection of historical photographs, and a donation from a local developer, Chinese

Community Church members (who purchased the building in 2006) authorized restoration. "We didn't know what we were going to find when we started pulling off the Formstone," says project architect Darrel Rippeteau. "The historical photos showed a light-colored structure capped by a tower dominating the street corner. The tower was long gone, but when we started cutting away Formstone, we discovered cream-colored walls that turned out to be brick heavily coated with paint." That paint may just have saved the building: It prevented the Formstone from fully adhering, making removal not only possible but easy. The crew "was able to shear most of it right off," Rippeteau says.

As the project moved forward, contractors from Worcester Eisenbrandt, Inc. uncovered still more good news. Mesh supporting the fake stone exterior had been nailed into mortar joints, so the bricks below were intact. And nearly 50 percent of the details from the 1852 building had survived in fine condition. Other than the tower, only eyebrows above the windows had been lost.

Photo research proved that ornate Italianate projections had crowned the windows, but no one could answer a crucial question: Had they been carved from lengths of wood or blocks of stone? "Then we started finding remnants of wood above the window tops," Rippeteau says, "and we were able to fabricate authentic replacements. We even incorporated the pieces of wood that remained buried in the walls, and applied our new eyebrows right on top."

The most dramatic change to the exterior came when church officials went beyond the original scope of the restoration effort and agreed to replace the metal dome (installed after 1906) with a replica of Walter's tower. Church member Gate Lew recalls holding his breath over this decision: "There was some talk of throwing a prefabricated fiberglass dome on top," he says, "and some of us almost had a heart attack. But clear heads prevailed, and the good guys won."

Working from vintage photographs, craftsmen replicated the frame of the original tower and craned it up onto the sanctuary. Then they spliced the frame onto 19th-century timbers—which had miraculously survived from the original tower—and finished it on site.

Lew remembers the moment when the scaffolding that had shrouded the church finally came down earlier this year. "Seeing the finished work—the red brick, the new eyebrows, the cleaned stained-glass windows, and a restored line of stone—was amazing. It was just a completely different building." Church Pastor Charles Koo agrees. "We didn't know what to expect," he says, "but to be honest, our restored church is even better than we'd imagined." ■

ROBERT LAUTMAN

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