

# Progressive Architecture

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# Progressive Architecture

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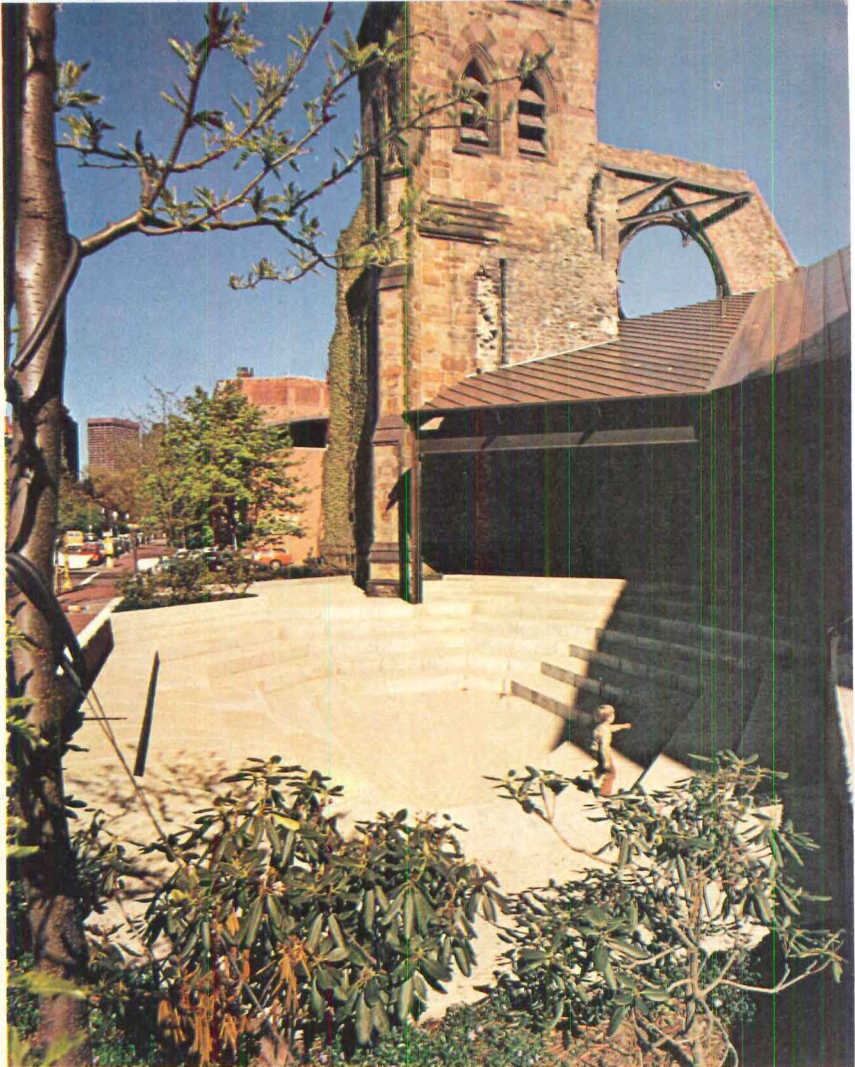
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**Cover:** The First and Second Church in Boston (p.44) by Paul Rudolph. Photo: John Veltri.

First and Second Church in Boston

# Rebirth in Back Bay





Rudolph points out that the sense of semi-enclosure in the court might have been more successful had the existing tower been nearer the street corner (above) and had the porch overhang extended further over the amphitheater. Protruding gutter supports, in retrospect, would not be handled the same way again, because of their inadvertent "California ranch" look.

**Rebuilding a burned-out church in Boston, Paul Rudolph was confronted with the challenges of scale and character and of changing church priorities toward the community.**

It was a commission fraught with seeming contradictions, paradoxes and, yes, controversies. When the Back Bay home of The First Church in Boston burned in 1968, who should be selected to design its replacement? During the interviews with architects, minister Rhys Williams recalls Paul Rudolph's warnings to the building committee, "I am considered a controversial architect." But then, neither Rudolph *nor* the First and Second Churches were unacquainted with controversy.

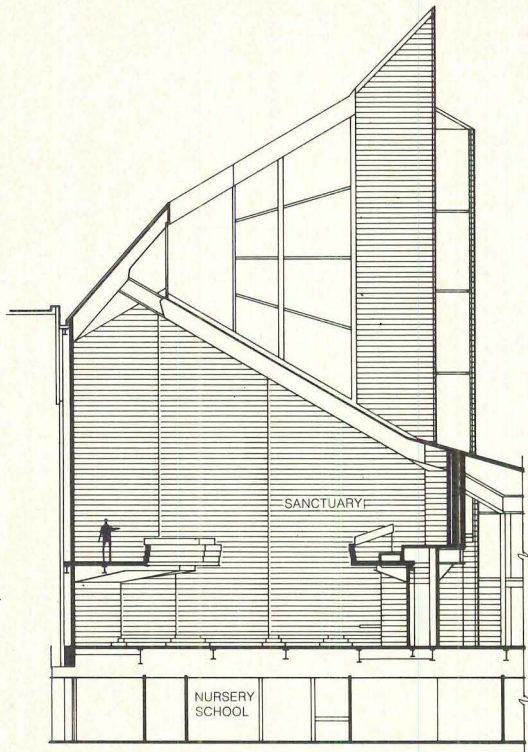
Consider a few historical notes. Founded in 1630 by colonists just arrived from England, the First Church grew until, in 1649, its quarters were outgrown and The Second Church was formed in the North end of Boston. In 1776, that "Old North Church" was torn down by the British for harboring political "traitors." The Second Church subsequently went through a progression of seven buildings, eventually coming to rest in Brookline, to the west. Meanwhile, under people like William Emerson, father of Ralph Waldo Emerson, The First Church was led to Unitarianism. The Second Church roster reads like a history book, with names like Paul Revere (trustee for 23 years), Increase, Cotton and Samuel Mather and Ralph Waldo Emerson. So when The First and Second Churches

again came together on Marlborough Street, the notion of facing controversy in rebuilding was a small problem indeed. Rudolph was selected.

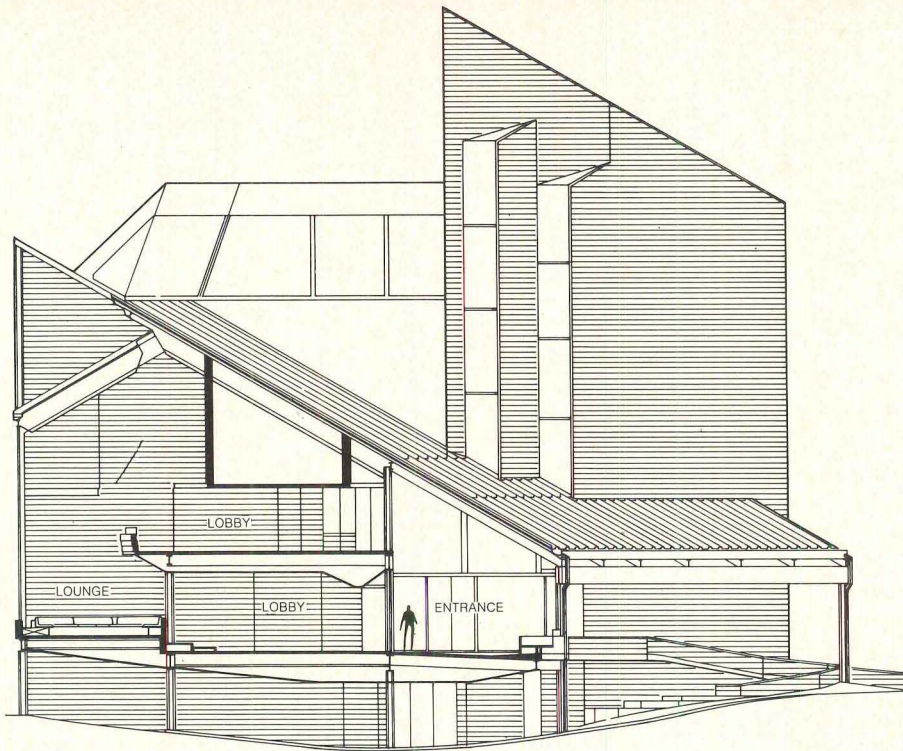
Among other things, the commission posed questions of Back Bay scale and necessitated responses to changing church philosophies. The streetscape, only a few blocks from the Boston Common, is made up of characteristic rowhouses along the Marlborough side; on Berkeley Street, however, the scale of adjacent apartments is larger. Rudolph was fully aware that scale and character would be at issue.

A still larger challenge followed from shifting priorities within the church as increased emphasis was placed on community services. The facilities were to invite use by people other than the congregation. The previous building, with its large sanctuary and typical ancillary spaces, limited that invitation. The worship service, albeit important, was not to be the sole use of the new church.

Several premises were to lead Rudolph to what he describes as "the nearest thing to a non-building that I've ever done." First, he recommended preserving the remaining tower and front wall. "It is very beautiful," he says, "and it would be impossible to rebuild that feeling." Second, he wanted to open the building to Marlborough Street, lessening the separation of community and church—making a physical statement of invitation. Third, the secular, social and religious aspects of church philosophies would be housed in ways that

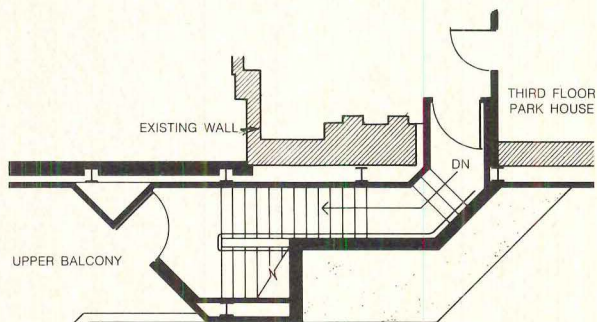


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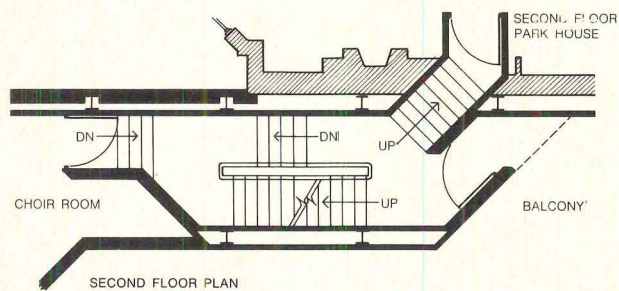


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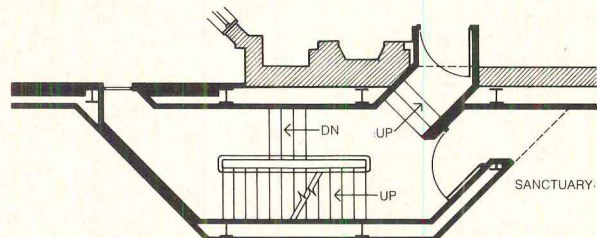
Connecting stair—new to existing buildings



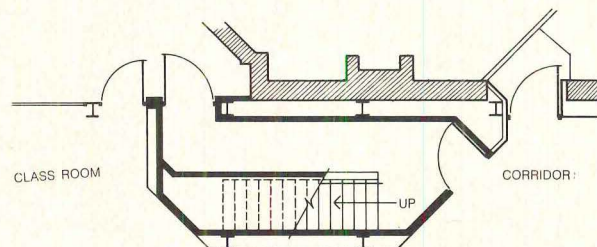
UPPER BALCONY PLAN



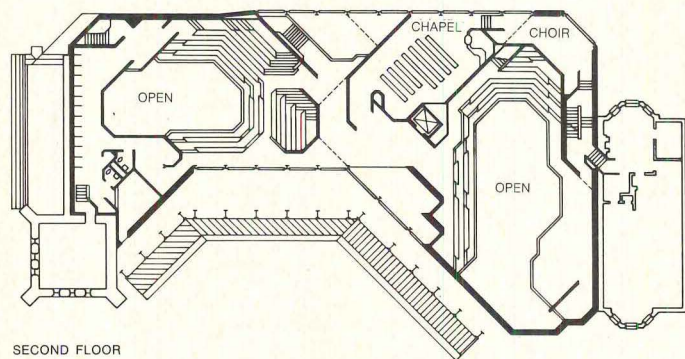
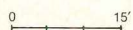
SECOND FLOOR PLAN



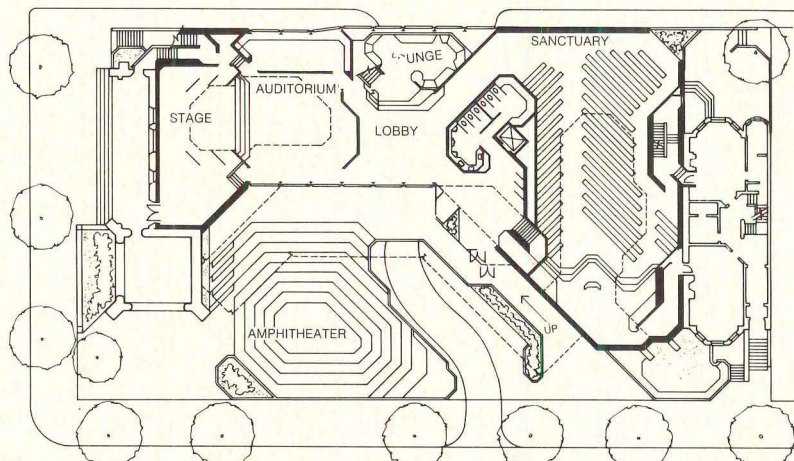
FIRST FLOOR PLAN



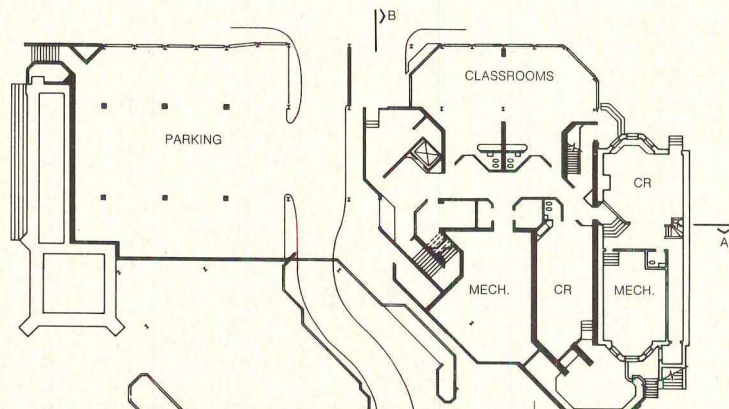
GROUND FLOOR



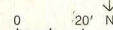
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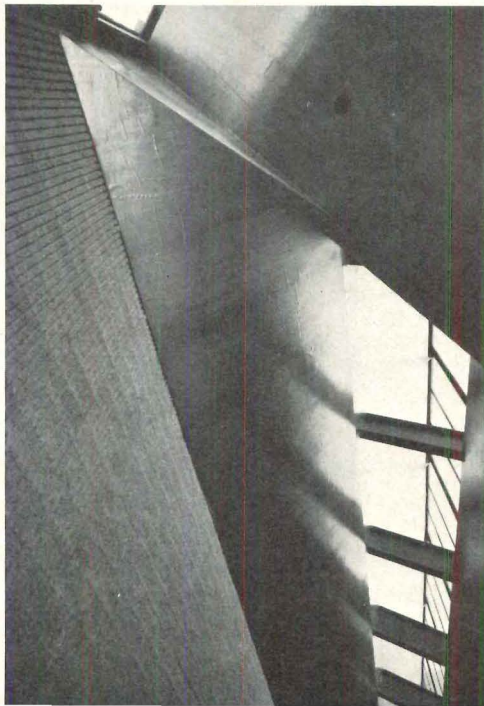
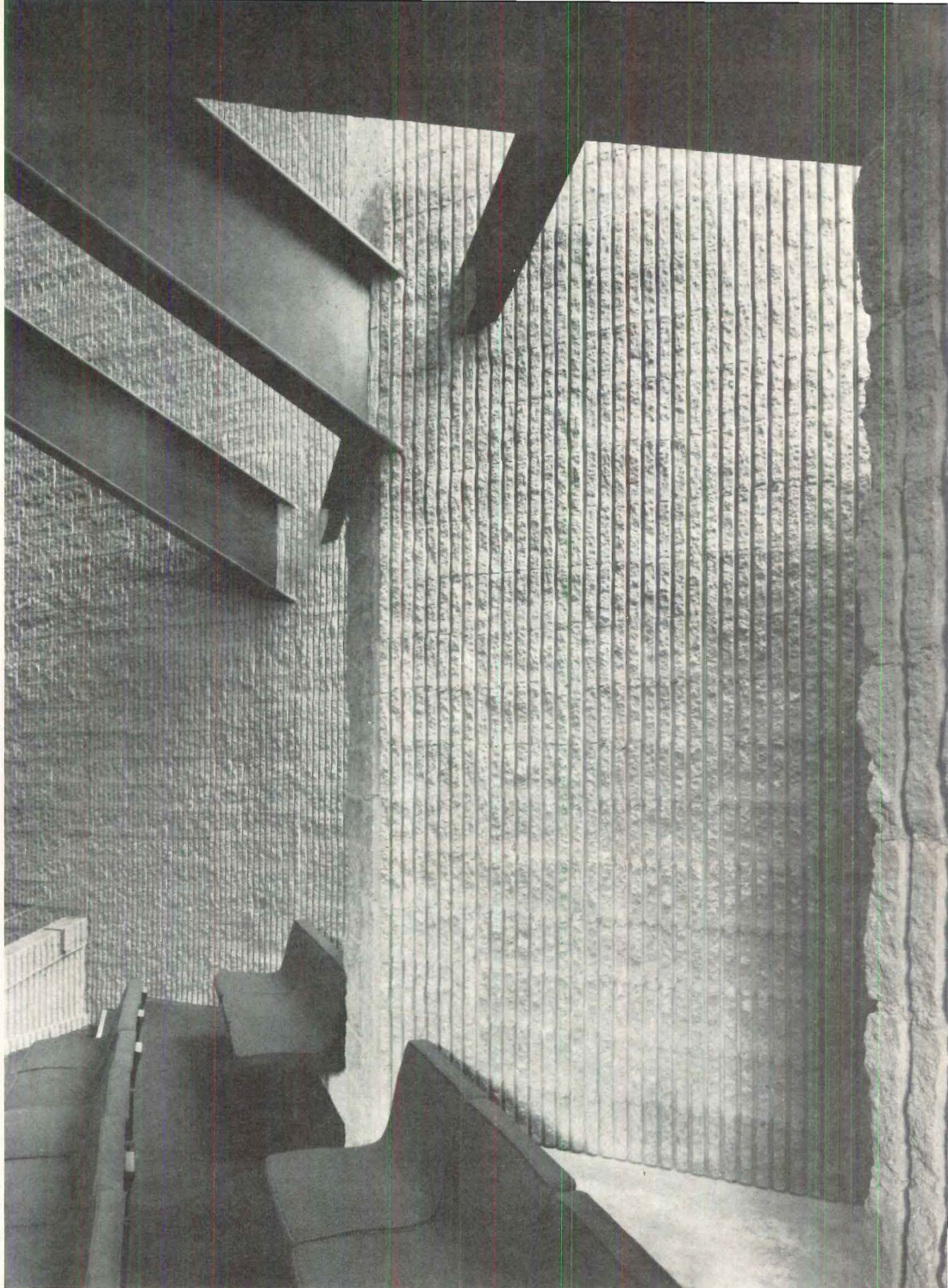
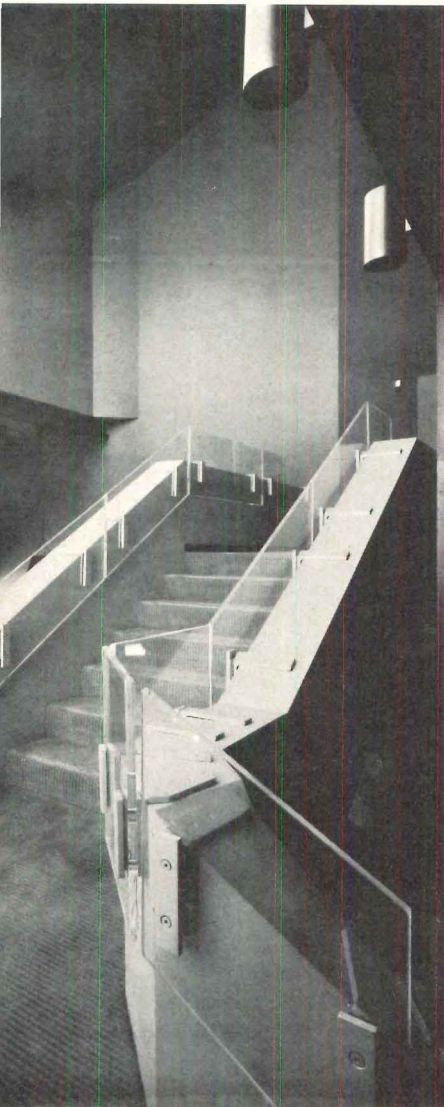
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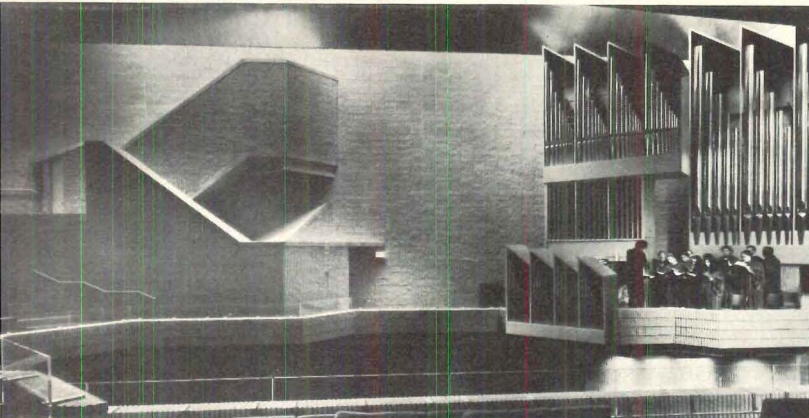
Rebirth in Back Bay



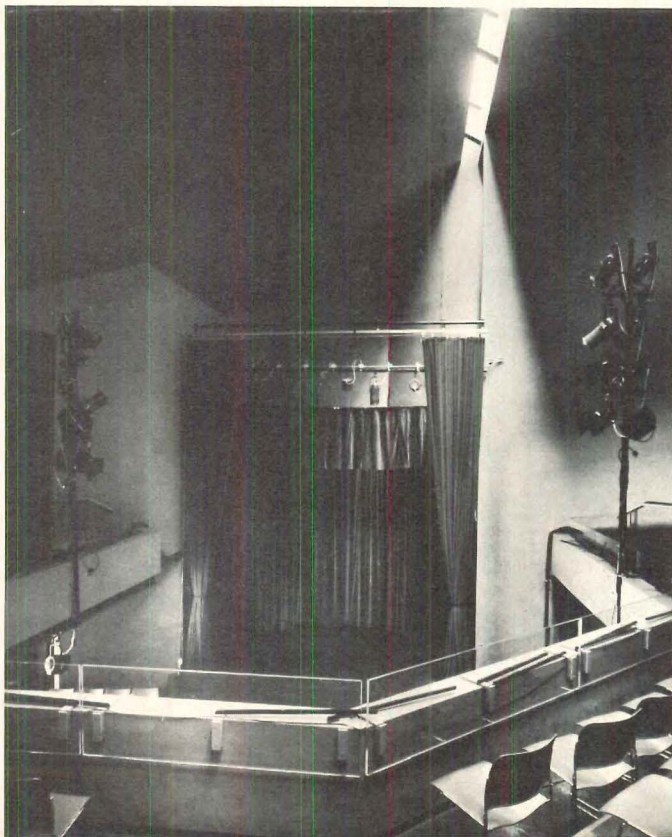
Polycyclic plates line stair and balcony railings, and the familiar Rudolph striated wall surfaces are dominant in major spaces. Structural members become aspects of abstract art in the sanctuary.



Sanctuary (above and below) is sometimes used for dramatic events.



Auditorium (below) is used by a college theater group on a regular basis.



## Rebirth in Back Bay

best reflected their relationships to the outside world.

There really is no structural system in the ordinary sense, although the building is framed in steel. "The psychology of space and lighting are the important things," Rudolph says, "clarity of structural form is *not* important." A courtyard hollowed out in front of the structure, framed by the existing tower, the wide church porch and the angled sanctuary wall, does the welcoming. It is hoped that the community will use the court as an amphitheater; string concerts and street fairs are welcomed and have begun to happen.

Since the church owns the house adjacent to the site, and since Rudolph wanted to "bookend" the continuous street façade at this transition point, the largest element, the sanctuary, was placed next to the house. Worshippers enter this religious space, the most secluded from the street, by a spiral route. From the street they are compressed through the low porch space, pass through the larger social area into another low passage and finally emerge in the large sanctuary. From that point, the spiral takes on vertical, spatial characteristics as the ceiling climbs up to the skylights and finally back around to the main light source—large windows out of the congregation's view. "The space," says Rudolph, "was designed as a great kaleidoscope for light," with the large windows oriented southeast for maximum effect at Sunday morning worship hours. Colored strip lighting in the window openings, to suggest a stained glass effect at night, is used less than it might have been; it is again, controversial.

The center social area is glazed and open to the porch. It turns out to be a natural place for small art exhibits, although Rudolph admits not having anticipated that use. Off the social area, and also glazed on the court side, is a small auditorium with a stage behind the concrete-reinforced original wall. It is used regularly for theater presentations by a local college group, and represents the secular interests in the program. Below the main level are parking spaces and nursery/classroom areas, which also serve as a weekday nursery school for the community.

For all of the program's ambition, the church is very restrained in expression—not subdued enough, of course, to satisfy those advocates of Back Bay traditionalism or of non-building for churches. The majority of the congregation, however, are pleased with the way the building works, mixing its own brand of humility with the formal aspects demanded of a place of worship. [JM]

### Data

**Project:** The First and Second Church in Boston.

**Architect:** Paul Rudolph.

**Program:** new church replacing previous building that was destroyed by fire. New facilities to provide for community use.

**Site:** corner of Marlborough and Berkeley Sts in Boston.

**Structural system:** wood piles with reinforced concrete pile caps and foundation walls, structural steel framing.

**Mechanical system:** oil fired boiler, forced air with supplementary fin radiation. Air conditioning by air cooled packaged water chiller.

**Major materials:** exterior, copper roofing with battens, ribbed concrete block; interior, ribbed concrete block, carpet and tile floors.

**Consultants:** structural, Nichols, Norton & Zaldastani; mechanical, McCarron, Hufnagle & Vegkley; plumbing, R.W. Sullivan.

**Photography:** John Veltri.



Colored strip lighting represents stained glass at night.

