

BUILT WITH LIGHT

NO. 23: MIT CHAPEL

Sharon Stammers continues her world tour exploring the best architecture that is built with light. This issue, Glenn Shrum picks a chapel with a difference designed by a Finn in the USA



"Few projects illustrate the merger of architecture, art and light better than Saarinen's chapel at MIT. From the single skylight located above the light coloured altar to the reflected light patterns that animate interior brick walls after reflecting off an exterior water feature, the integration of basic principles of light in the expression of form and material results in a cohesive spatial expression. For me, the hanging metal sculpture is the most inspiring feature. Made up of a range of textured metal panels placed at varying angles, the genius of this piece resides in the composition of the component parts. By gradually decreasing the density of light reflecting objects as they get closer to the light source, the visual focus is brought to an area of less light but more brightness - reminding us that some darkness is full of light."

Glenn Shrum - Flux Studio

Damn, I hate it when I get a building I've never been to and, after researching, want to visit. My list is expanding and I was doing so well with this series! There's only been a few of the buildings that I haven't been to myself. Shame the mondo*arc budget doesn't quite stretch to sending me personally to check out each entry's worth in the Built with Light stable.

If, like me, you've never been to Cambridge, Massachusetts and Saarinen's amazing chapel, you can see from the photo why Glenn has chosen it.

Saarinen was born in Finland in 1910 and was known as a 'structural expressionist' who succeeded in giving all of his buildings a distinctive imprint. The small and humble chapel is an early Saarinen work but a good example of mid-century modern architecture and was conceived as a non-denominational space for individual retreat and prayer. The building employs the language of light and form to convey spirituality.

It was dedicated in 1955 and is located on the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, next to Kresge Auditorium which Saarinen also designed. Humble in its size and material, Saarinen chose bricks that were rough and imperfect to create a textured effect as the sunlight rakes across their surface. The building consists of a simple rectangular narthex connected to a cylindrical and windowless chapel, 15m in diameter and 9.1m high and is topped by an aluminum spire giving no clues as to the interior of the space. The bricks are supported by a series of low concrete arches of differing radii. It is set inside a shallow concrete moat and the water serves to separate it from the urban landscape and safeguard an inner world of contemplation whilst also reflecting patterns of light onto the exterior wall of the chapel.

To enter the chapel, a visitor enters into

a small grove of birch trees and through timber doors before turning 180 degrees to head back through an enclosed corridor glazed with violet and clear glass. They are then drawn into the high ceiling space toward the light falling onto the white marble altar from the ceiling.

"The chapel is organic. Its dark, undulating walls pulsate. The warm-hued brick surfaces have a texture like an old servant's hand, rough and faithful, imprinted with memories from the years. The darkness is comforting and intimate, penetrated by only two otherworldly sources of light. The light from the bottom comes from water reflected off of the moat to the interior of the building to tease the rippling walls. The other, the chapel's centerpiece, is a hushed light from above the altar and dramatized by falling on a shimmering golden screen by sculptor Harry Bertoina. The effect is sublime." (www.galinsky.com)

Within the sculpture, Saarinen had sought to create a particular lighting effect he had experienced in his youth whilst sitting in a mountain village in Sparta where the moonlight overhead and the reflected light from the horizon overlapped. This memory translated into a circular skylight above the altar and uninterrupted double glazing located at the top of the arches where daylight shining onto the water is reflected shimmering up into the chapel's interior. Both the Chapel and the Auditorium were subject to a mixed reception. Due to the lack of openings, visitors were confused about the scale of the building. Other complaints included the fact that the chapel was too self enclosed and did not engage with its immediate environment. However, Leland M. Roth included the building in his History of American Architecture and stated that "... through the sheer manipulation of light and its focus on a blazingly white marble altar block, Saarinen created a place of mystic quiet".