

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception stands on a busy corner site in downtown Lake Charles. A late example of the Romanesque Revival style designed by New Orleans architects Favrot and Livaudais, the resource consists of three connected components which line two sides of a service court (see attached sketch map). These components include a two story church with a five story bell tower, a two story rectory connected to the church via a breezeway at the latter's rear wall, and a one-story garage and storage structure attached to the rectory's rear wall. All three are of masonry (brick) construction, although many of the church's interior walls are lined with stone blocks. All three portions were built connected together in 1913. Although the cathedral has experienced some alteration and the addition of a large wing (connected to the church by a second breezeway at its northeast corner), the resource remains eligible for National Register listing.

The Church

Although its four arms are not equal in size, the church's footprint resembles the shape of a Greek cross. It contains a short nave with side aisles and a clerestory, a rear balcony, transepts almost equal in length to the nave, a polygonal apse with a vaulted half-dome ceiling, two side altars, and the above mentioned bell tower. The interior geometry of these spaces is deliberately articulated on the exterior, as is typical of Romanesque churches. Other Romanesque features associated with the church include:

- 1) lower floor walls pierced by large round (semi-circular) arched windows.
- 2) the use of an arcade to form the breezeway connecting the church with the rectory. In addition, the windows of the bell tower and clerestory are arranged in groups forming a series of arcades. The arches in the clerestory, as well as those in the tower's second and fifth floors, spring from stone colonettes.
- 3) extensive use of arched corbel tables forming decorative blind arcades beneath the church's eaves.
- 4) the presence of monumental entrances called portals. On the exterior these portals are distinguished by brick semi-circular compound arches supported by engaged stone compound drum columns. Bas relief sculptures of religious topics fill the arches' tympanums.
- 5) the use of arcades to separate the nave from the accompanying side aisles. The arches forming these arcades spring from columns and pilasters with capitals decorated by crosses, acanthus leaves, and other floral motifs.
- 6) the use of groin vaults to form the ceilings of the side aisles and transepts.

Although Romanesque style buildings share the use of the round arch as their most identifiable characteristic, each European nation which built in the style modified its appearance according to that nation's own building traditions. Thus, certain of the church's features reflect Romanesque architecture as it developed in the Lombard region of northern Italy. These features include the building's red tile roof and the use of monolithic rather than drum columns in the nave. In addition, the bell tower takes the form of a campanile rising in well-marked stages to a roof with overhanging eaves. The top story of this campanile is the only portion of the church featuring a polychrome color scheme. It is diapered in patterns of diamonds and checks formed by the use of black, white, and red bricks.

Other decorative features found on the church's exterior include a watertable, stone roundels with teas relief crosses, tall brick crosses flanking the church's portals, crosses atop the church's four arms and the bell tower, and original stained glass windows in the clerestory. Additional interior features include geometric carvings of overlapping circles surrounding the portals and the decoration of the church's floor, which is suggestive of the influence of Byzantine art. It features green, rose, gray and beige terrazzo laid in geometric shapes including circles, diamonds, and rectangles.

The church has experienced the following changes since its construction:

- 1) the addition of several marble features to the interior. In 1923 three marble altars in the Gothic style were installed. These altars originally stood in a church in Salt Lake City and were purchased for the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception when the Utah church was remodeled.

Around 1950 a marble wainscot was installed on the walls of the side aisles and the chancel, while an acoustical material was attached to the nave walls above the marble wainscot. In addition, the nave's columns were sheathed in marble and a marble pulpit replaced the original wooden one at this time.

2) a 1930s era remodeling which affected the interior walls, the ceilings, and the large side aisle windows. Stenciling was applied to the walls of the chancel, the walls of the side altars, and the under-side of the ribs which form the interior arches and vaults. At the same time, paintings with religious themes were applied to the chancel's ceiling and above one interior door. These changes took place before 1935. A series of elaborate Viennese stained glass windows depicting the story of Mary's life were installed in the side aisles in 1939.

3) the replacement of two deteriorated sets of original doors with replicas; the replacement of the interior light fixtures with copies of the originals; and the installation of spotlights in the transepts, above the main altar, and in the balcony.

4) alterations to the spaces at the front of the church containing the baptismal font and one confessional. The baptismal font (originally located in the church's southeast corner below the tower) was removed to create a "crying room" for infants. The wall between this space and the nave was replaced by a large pane of glass which allows parents to see the service while tending to their children. An interior wall within one of the confessional chambers was removed and a vinyl wall covering was applied to the chamber's remaining walls.

5) the 1973 construction of the above mentioned one-story wing and connecting arcade. This brick wing serves as a small chapel and parish life center. Designed by Dunn and Quinn, Architects and Engineers, it replicates the Italian tile roof, Romanesque corbeled blind arcading, and large arched openings found on the church. However, the large arch on the wing's facade contains a niche with a statue instead of a stained glass window. A landscaped courtyard lies between the wing and the church.

The Rectory

The design of the cathedral's attached asymmetrical rectory is a more restrained version of the Romanesque than that found on the church. Its features include round arched windows and doors and an Italian tile roof. A watertable also encircles this building. Alterations to the rectory include the installation of cast iron railings on the front steps, iron burglar bars over most first floor openings, a fire escape on the elevation facing the service court, and air conditioning equipment on the rear.

The Garage/Storage Facility

The garage/storage area is a low, shallow, horizontal structure which is utilitarian in appearance and construction.

Assessment of Integrity

Although the above list of alterations may seem significant at first glance, all of the Romanesque Revival features which contribute to the cathedral's architectural integrity remain intact. The most noticeable alteration on the exterior--the construction of the wing--replicates the cathedral's style. As an architectural landmark within the city of Lake Charles, and as the only example of the Romanesque Revival style within the community, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

Non-Contributing Element

Also on the grounds is a large rubble stone grotto sheltering a statue of Mary. Built in 1948, it is being counted as a non-contributing element for the purposes of this nomination.

Significant date 1913

Architect/Builder Reinhart and Donovan, Contractors
Architect: Favrot & Livaudais

Criterion C

Statement of Significance

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is locally significant as an architectural landmark within the city of Lake Charles. It achieves this distinction because of its monumental Romanesque Revival styling and its Italian-inspired campanile-like bell tower. In addition, the cathedral is significant as the only example of the Romanesque Revival style within the city.

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception's landmark status is particularly pronounced because the City of Lake Charles has lost so much of its historic non-residential architecture. Due to booming prosperity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lake Charles had a truly outstanding downtown with numerous landmarks. Old photos show a very impressive, very urban-looking central business district.

Although the city retains a significant and large collection of historic residences, its downtown has been almost completely destroyed, due largely to a relentless campaign of demolition and modernization waged in the prosperous '50s, '60s, and '70s. The end result is that Lake Charles has only about ten architecturally noteworthy non-residential buildings left, one of which is the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Of these survivors, it is the only building in the downtown, or in the entire city, to feature Romanesque Revival styling.

The cathedral's architectural landmark status rests upon its size; its Italian-influenced five story bell tower and tile roof; and its extensive use of Romanesque arched windows, compound arched portals, and blind arcades.

It should also be noted that the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is one of a group of buildings in Lake Charles designed by the noted New Orleans architectural firm, of Favrot and Livaudais. This extremely prominent, quite prolific firm received numerous major commissions beginning in the wake of the fire of 1910 and continuing on through the '20s. Their extant work includes the Calcasieu Parish Courthouse, the Lake Charles City Hall, the Calcasieu Marine Bank, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, and various schools and residences.

Historical Note

Built in 1858, the first Catholic Church in Lake Charles was a mission chapel dedicated to St. Francis de Sales. In 1869 the area received its first resident priests and became an officially organized Roman Catholic parish. When the St. Francis church was damaged by a hurricane in 1879, its pastor decided to construct a new building. Renamed the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the new structure was completed in 1881. Along with many other buildings and residences in the city, this church and its ancillary buildings were destroyed by fire on April 23, 1910. The current church was completed in 1913. Upon the creation of the Diocese of Lake Charles in 1979, the church became a cathedral.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Site visit by National Register staff.

Staff knowledge of Lake Charles historic resources.