

Religion Today



NEW DESIGNS ANNOUNCED

His Ideas Add Sparkle To 'Sidewalk' Churches

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A church with a roof-garden for evening services under the stars . . .

Another church with a roof that seems to "float" . . .

A round sanctuary . . .
Nathan Johnson, 37, newcomer to church architecture in Detroit, revealed Friday that these are among features of three new churches he is starting in the Detroit area this year.

The amazing fact is that none of Johnson's projects is planned on any great expanse of acreage in the far-flung suburbs.

They are for the most part inner-city churches, in many cases for congregations whose previous meeting places were old meat markets and grocery stores.

ALMOST ALL are on shoe-string budgets, with two half-million dollar exceptions in the dozen he has built or is planning. But invariably Johnson, of 2041 Lawrence, works against an almost total lack of space.

And once built, the new

churches still open up right on the sidewalk.

The roof-garden unit will be an addition to the Second Baptist Church, 441 Monroe. Johnson will use \$500,000 to completely remodel the old building and to build a sparkling five-story education wing whose all-glass outer walls jut over a well-worn area of the inner city.

The roof that "floats" is for the new \$60,000 Apostolic Faith of Christ Church, Inkster. Johnson will set the connecting wall back in and surround it with glass, so that the roof, rising like a half-star, appears completely free.

The round-shaped church, with the altar in the center overlooking courtyards, is a \$100,000 job for St. Clement's Episcopal Church, Inkster.

JOHNSON, a quiet-spoken modest little man, father of twins (Charles and Jacqueline, 2), keeps showing up at dedications of new Negro or



Nathan Johnson

interracial churches in Detroit.

He was at the dedication of the \$107,000 ship-shaped, gray-and-black new sanctuary of the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, Ecorse. The congregation had moved out of an old meat shop.

Last Sunday he was at the special ceremony opening the New Bethel Baptist Church, a \$500,000 remodeling of the old, dilapidated Oriole Theater in glass, new ceilings, and fresh color.

Johnson designed both. And he's done the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, a "rectangle with a lot of glass" at Twelfth and Glendale, for \$65,000; the hexagon chapel of Grace Episcopal Church, just off the sidewalk at Twelfth and Virginia Park, for \$70,000; the tabernacle-shaped Church of Christ of Conant Gardens, 18480 Conant, which connects with its old store-meeting place, for \$55,000; the Pure in Heart Baptist Church, Holcomb and

Goethe, a small "box" (his first job on his own) with a big glass front, for \$20,000.

JOHNSON CAME to Detroit in 1950 with an architectural degree from Kansas State University. His only prizes have been the usual "poppy day" awards given in his home town of 4,000, Herington, Kan. He credits a school teacher for giving him a lot of special encouragement in art.

He uses a lot of white and a lot of black.

He broke off on his own six years ago, after working on architectural staffs designing some of Detroit's biggest suburban churches.

"We don't go in much for symbolism," he said. "So often symbolism says more than the person can grasp and becomes mere decoration."

JOHNSON USES material that is easy to assemble, when the budget is low. At the Conant Garden church, the roof is made of pre-cast wood fiber compressed and clamped together, at every four feet.

"We try to be honest," says Johnson, a trustee at St. Andrew's Presbyterian church. "If we want to decorate a church, we let the structure do it instead of applying ornaments."

"I compare a building to an organism, such as the human body. It is beautiful because it works."

He dislikes what he calls the "exhibitionism" in many new churches ("they try to look like missiles") and the "dishonest copies" of the past.

"Having dedicated myself to architecture, when I see how much is wasted and how much ugliness is put up, it makes me sick," he says.

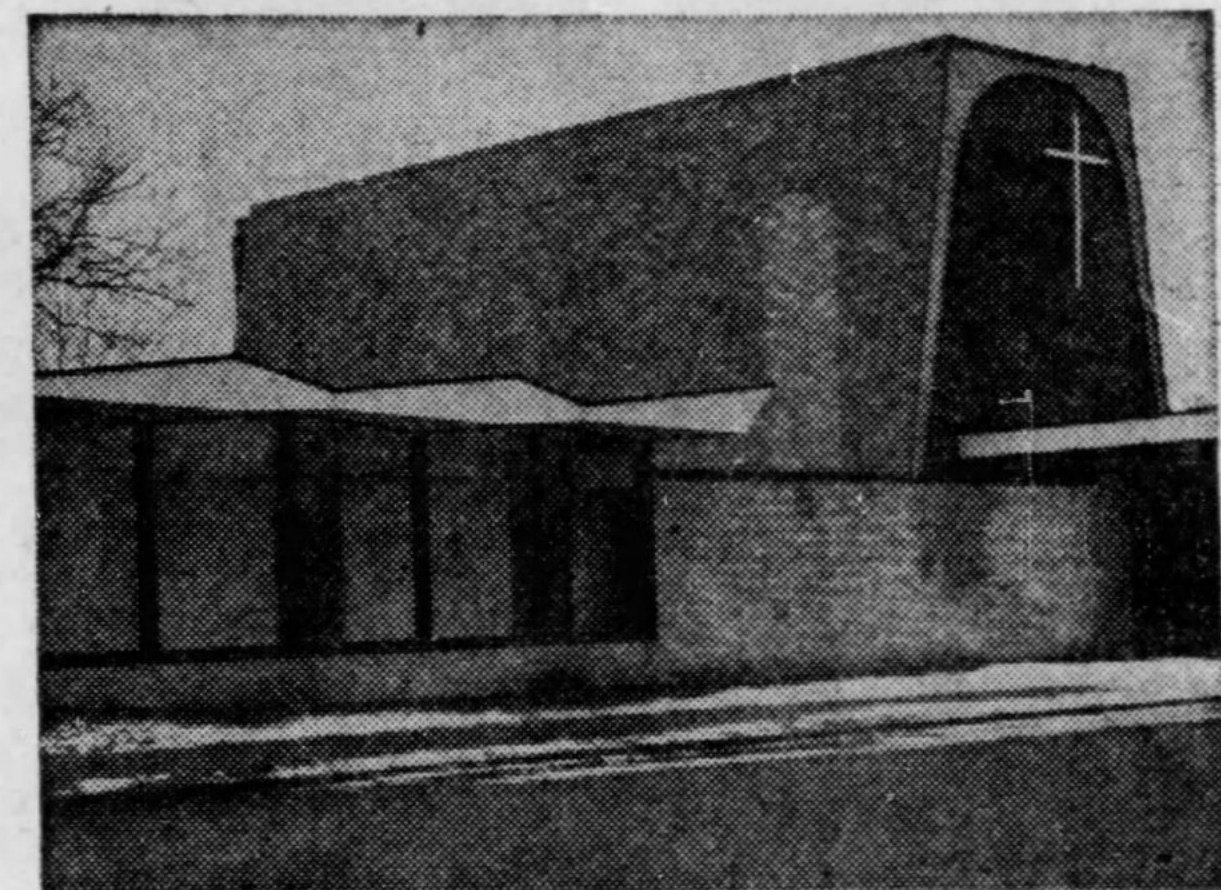
Colonial churches nauseate him particularly, he says. "I could never build a colonial church. If I did, I would be telling a lie."

"We're not living a colonial life, we're not using colonial materials and we don't even believe in colonialism; so why design a colonial church?"



Like an organism . . .

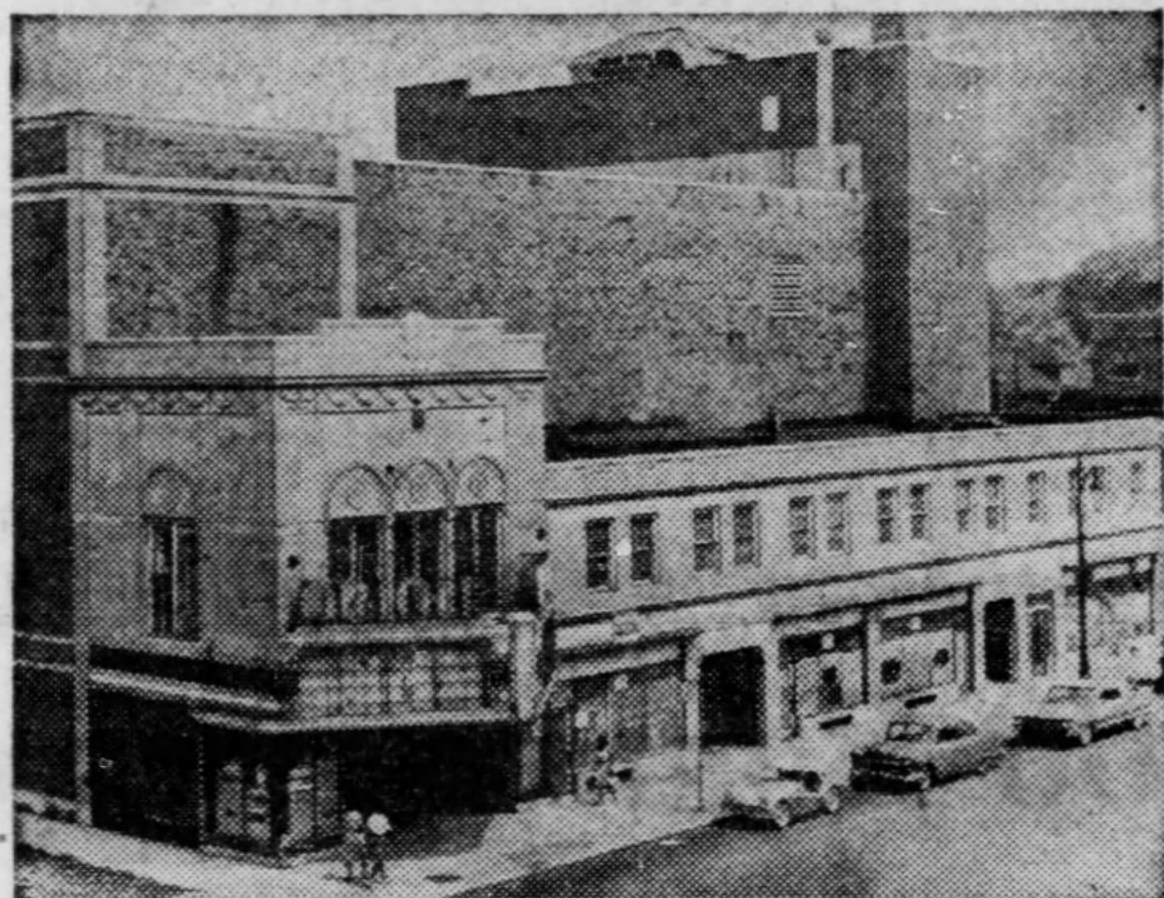
Conant Garden Church of Christ



Simple honesty . . .

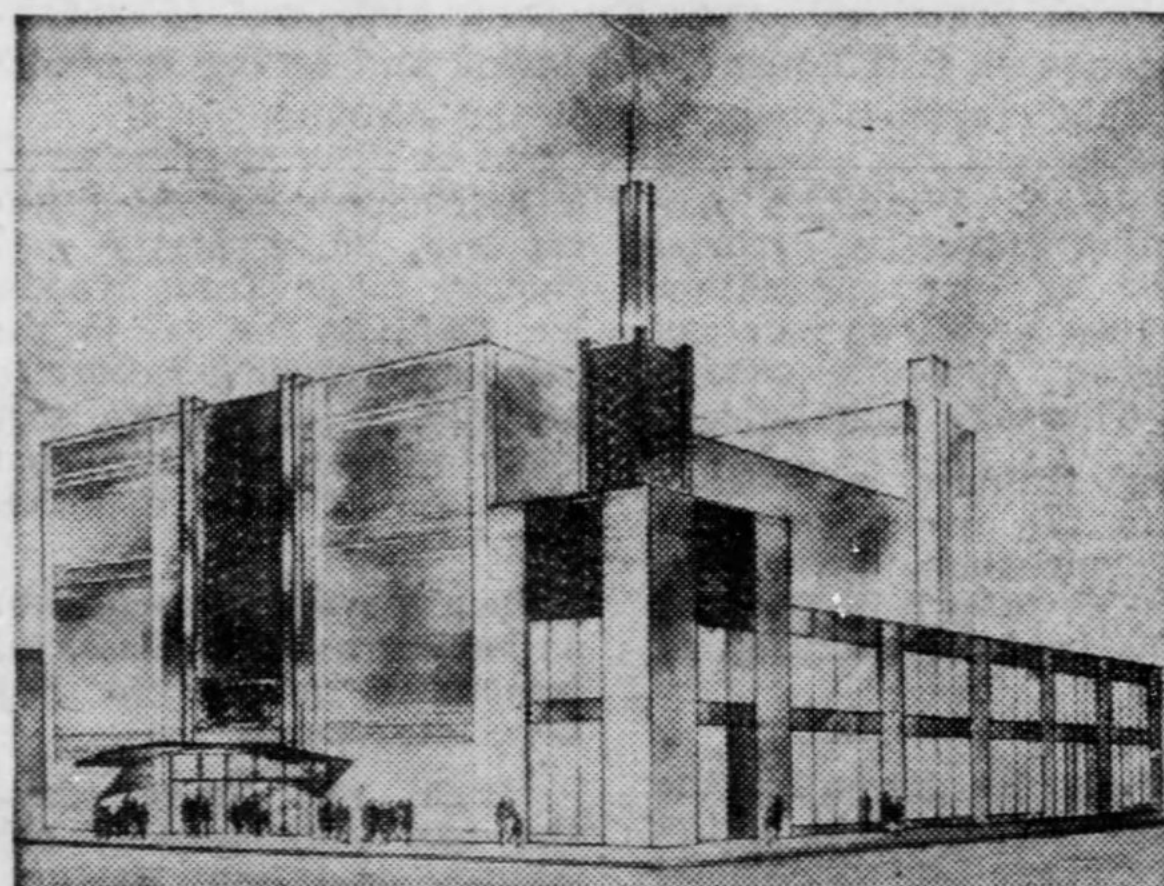
Conant Garden Church of Christ (outside)

BEFORE: A Theater . . .

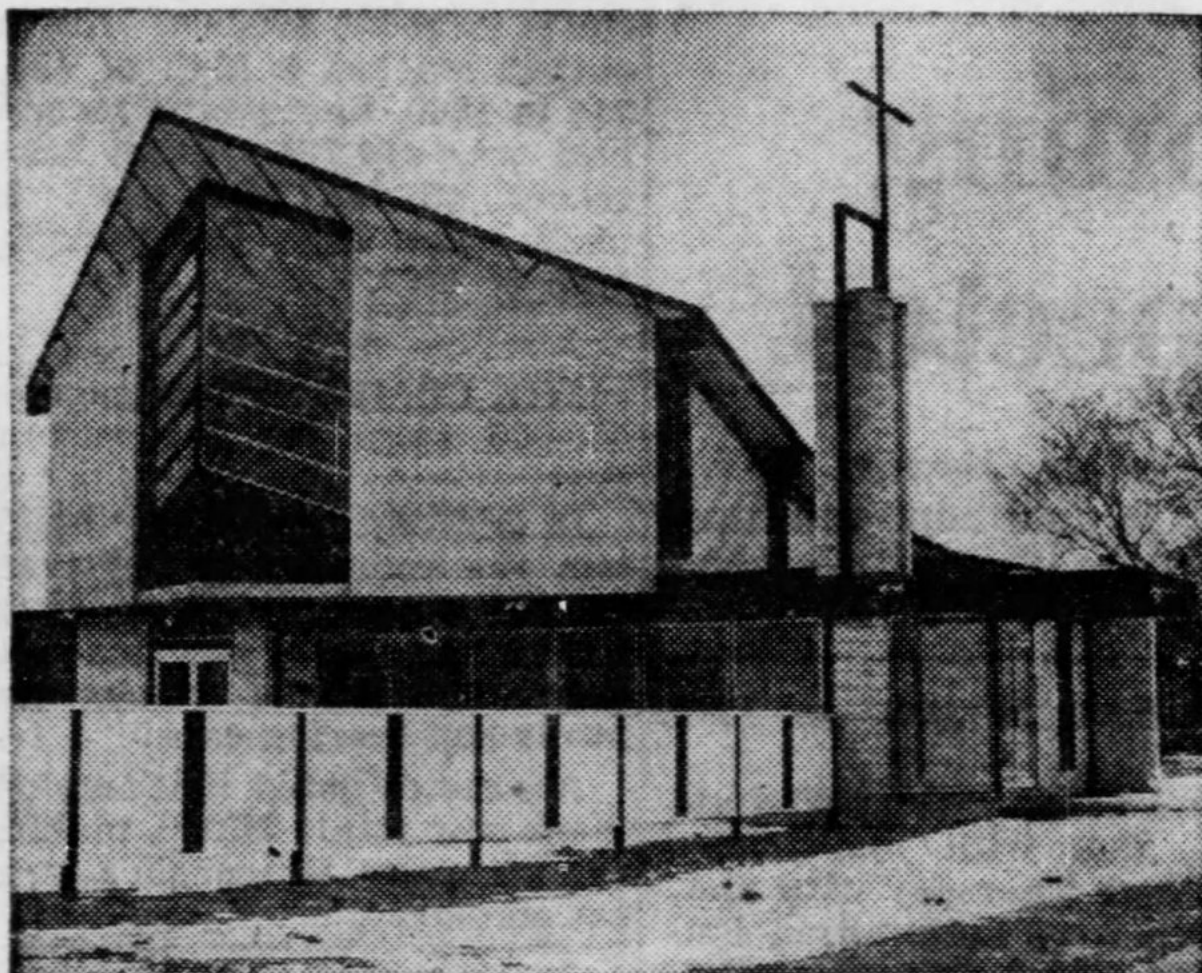


The old Oriole Theater lay broken, dying . . .

AFTER: A Temple



Now as New Bethel Baptist Church it has new life



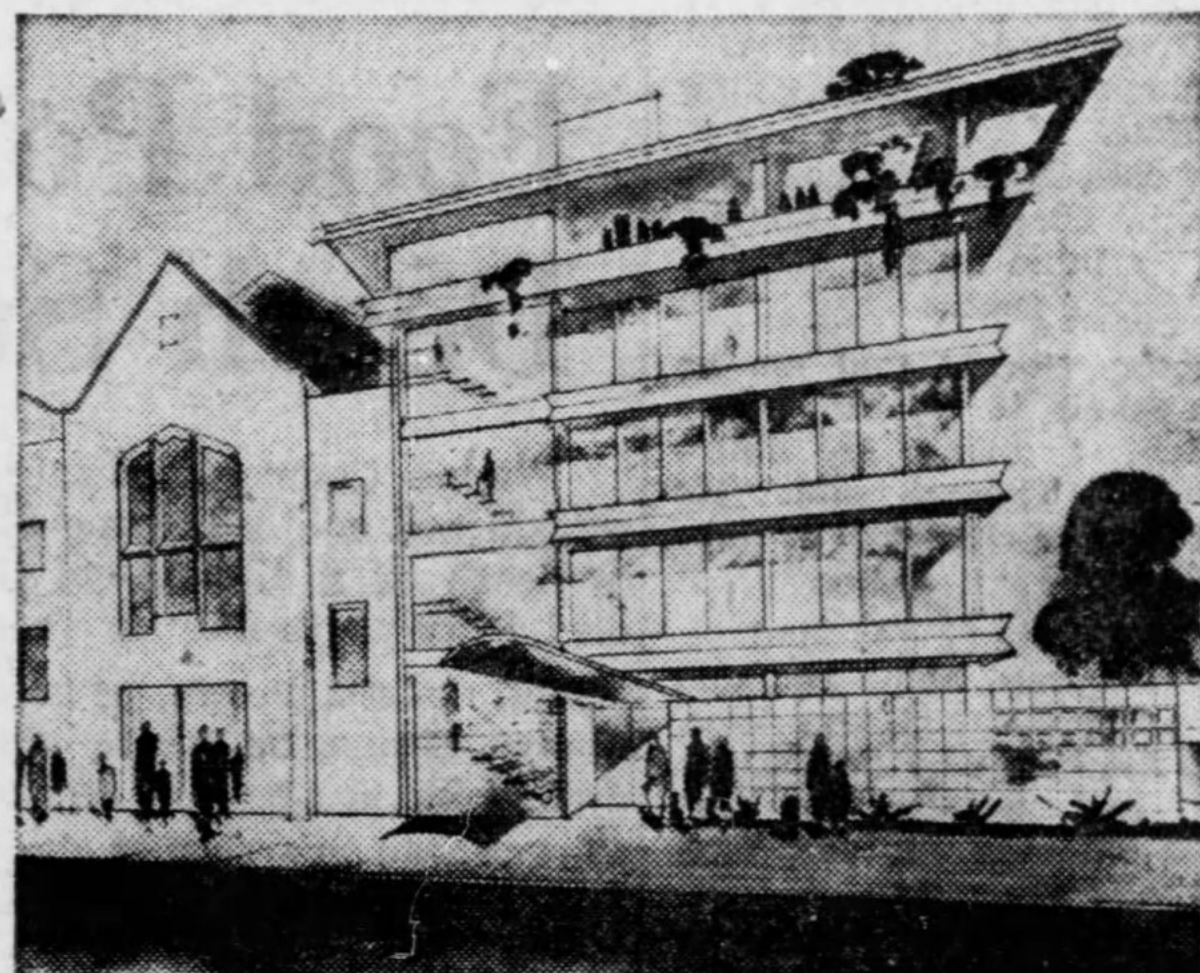
A ship of faith . . .

Church of the Resurrection



Chapel on sidewalk . . .

Grace Episcopal Church



Roof-garden Sunday-school . . .

Second Baptist Church