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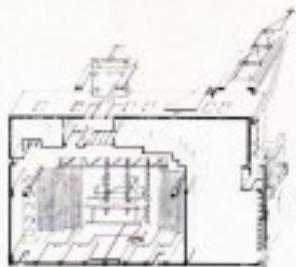
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A Garage Becomes a Parish Church with a Few Simple Gestures

The St. Fidelis Roman Catholic congregation in this suburban pocket of northwestern Toronto is largely first and second generation immigrant, mainly Italian. For years it held services in a school gymnasium. Then it acquired an old construction company garage and asked architect **Rocco Maragna** to convert it into a church for the extremely modest sum of \$450,000. To minimize costs, Maragna was asked to keep the new construction within the walls of the garage.

The 35-year-old Maragna was born in a small town in the Abruzzi region in the center of Italy's rugged spine. In his head he carries memories of the old Romanesque basilicas of the Abruzzi towns of his childhood. The churches are simple structures with bare symbolic elements: cupola, canopy, and bell tower. These essential elements compose a visual shorthand, a minimal sketch of an image of worship.

The old garage was built out of a random collection of materials left over from various construction contracts in the 1960s. Concrete columns and beams, open-web steel joists, block, brick, and wood paneling were assembled without design. A deep oil trough gouged the cement floor. Roof levels varied. It seemed an altogether unprepossessing prospect.

Apart from a parish building committee, Maragna also had to satisfy the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation for the Diocese of Toronto, which consecrates all churches in the city. The garage smells too much of oil, the hierarchy protested, unable to imagine how the architect could transform it into a place of worship.

"Churches are consecrated with oil," Father Pollo, the pastor, retorted. "Babies are baptised with oil, priests are ordained with it. Once a year, on Holy Thursday, the cardinal reconsecrates the cathedral with oil. Oil is a central metaphor for holiness in our religion. The transformation of garage oil into the sacramental substance is a kind of mundane miracle."

Maragna terms his approach to the conversion "symbolic intervention." Those bare symbolic elements of traditional



Fiona Spalding-Smith



Fiona Spalding-Smith

Catholic architecture, cupola, canopy, bell tower, that bare sketch of an image of worship, were applied to transform the garage into a church with a minimum of means.

The existing structure was modified as little as possible. The only major structural intervention was the use of a 90-foot steel truss to open up the junction of the one-story northern half of the building and its two-story rear. This eight-foot-deep truss allowed the removal of the inside wall so that the nave and the main sanctuary could become one volume.

The cupola is raised above the altar as a triangular skylight cut in the old flat steel-decked roof. Beneath the cupola a series of suspended baffles, made out of drywall on metal stud, diffuses the natural daylight.

Apart from the cupola, canopy, and bell tower, the exterior of the old building is largely untouched. The brickwork and stucco infills are painted in a uniform

crisp white. The roof fascias are deep blue.

Inside, the blue-painted deep steel truss and supporting columns likewise recall the building's, and the congregation's, industrial past. It is this remarkable marriage of profane and sacred idioms that distinguishes St. Fidelis.

The church makes no pretense to grandeur. Its quality is a discreetly worshipful elegance that is relaxed without being in any way secular, fitting to its suburban congregation.

In its quiet interplay of natural and artificial light, its overlay of the mundane and the spiritual, St. Fidelis transforms an old workaday building into sacred architecture with an economy of gesture.

The "symbolic interventions" are superbly judged. The image of worship is sketched in with a sure touch. A commonplace structure, built for a rough function, has become, in the architect's words, "A religious space in which man can celebrate his presence on earth." L.W.