

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 531 Fifth Street

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Columbus

Vicinity: N/A

State: IN

County: Bartholomew

Code: IN005

Zip Code: 47201

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: _____

Public-State: _____

Public-Federal: _____

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: _____

Site: _____

Structure: _____

Object: _____

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

0

0

0

1

Noncontributing

0 buildings

0 sites

0 structures

0 objects

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

Modernism in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Design, and Art in Bartholomew County, Indiana, 1942-1999

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ Entered in the National Register
- ___ Determined eligible for the National Register
- ___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- ___ Removed from the National Register
- ___ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 3

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: RELIGION

Sub: religious facility

Current: RELIGION

Sub: religious facility

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Modern

Materials:

Foundation: CONCRETE

Walls: BRICK

Roof: OTHER

Other:

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 4

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

First Christian Church is a large building with irregular massing and an irregular plan (photo 1). The building is built of brick, with Indiana limestone and concrete details. It has steel sash windows (photos 2 and 3). Doors are either steel sash, where they are integrated with the window system, or wood where they are set in masonry walls (photo 4). Roofs are flat, with minimal overhangs. The brick is a blend that tends toward reddish brown and tan. Mortar joints are tooled, and mortar is ochre colored. A campanile (right in photo 1) stands west of the north facade of the sanctuary. A Youth Center (1957), designed by the Indianapolis firm of McGuire and Shook, stands across the street to the south. The Youth Center is not included in this nomination. First Christian Church is minimally altered, as noted below, and is generally in good condition, the exception being that some of the stone paving is weathered and has settled unevenly.

First Christian Church occupies a full city block. It is a transition property between downtown, on the west, and a residential neighborhood of nineteenth and early twentieth century houses on the east. North of the church, across Fifth Street, stands the Storey House/Visitor's Center, an 1864 Italianate style house with a 1995 addition designed by Roche-Dinkeloo; and I.M. Pei's Cleo Rogers Memorial Library (1969) with its large Henry Moore sculpture (1971) standing in the plaza. The First Christian Church property is landscaped with mature maple trees and lawns. The building is built around a large sunken courtyard (photos 2 and 3).

The church is made up of five principal masses: the sanctuary (left in photo 1), a high rectangular space running north and south; the chapel, a two-story section at the rear; the Sunday school, a two-story classroom building that also has a lower level facing onto the sunken courtyard; and the bridge (photo 3), a two-story linear structure of corridors and offices that links all three main elements of the building across the sunken courtyard. A freestanding 166 foot-high campanile (right in photo 1) is placed several feet west of the sanctuary. The campanile extends below street level to the courtyard level. The massing of First Christian Church is a composition of interlocking rectangular blocks of varying sizes and heights.

The sanctuary faces north (photo 1). Limestone steps the width of the facade lead up about three-and-a-half feet to the large (about 20 feet deep) plaza at floor level. Low stone benches at east and west are used in lieu of guardrails. The facade is made up of a large-scale grid of rectangular limestone panels that extend about three inches from the face of the wall. The wall plane itself is developed as a frame for the limestone panels, made of courses of rowlock brick. Most of the limestone panels are smooth, but four have linear patterns in slight relief. There is a Latin cross in relief to the right of center. East of the entrance, one of the panels is shaped into a sculptural form that was probably intended for one of the sculptures by Carl Milles that Saarinen expected would be commissioned for those locations.¹ The concrete roof slab is about 12 inches thick. It overhangs the facade by about 12 inches. A copper coping in the form of a large bullnose runs around the roof edge, and at almost all roof edges on the building.

The entrance is punched into the ornamented plane of the façade (photo 1). It is off-center, sheltered by a deeply cantilevered concrete canopy the width of the corresponding opening

¹ The intervention of the Second World War and consequent shortages of bronze prevented casting the sculpture, and the project was not taken up again after the war. It is not known if work on the sculptures was ever begun.

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 5

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

below. The underside of the canopy is incised with a linear geometric pattern. Three pairs of doors are flanked by sidelights of fixed glass, all set in wood frames. The oak doors are faced with strips of oak screwed to the door in alternating horizontals and verticals.² Door pulls are opposing “L”-shaped stainless steel.

On the west side of the sanctuary, a wide flight of limestone steps descends between the sanctuary and the campanile to a broad walkway of concrete pavers in the sunken courtyard (photo 2). The walls of the sanctuary and campanile are limestone along the steps, emphasizing the passage. The limestone facing on the sanctuary side extends from the entrance plaza. It steps down to become the cap of a group of windows for the auditorium, and then steps down again to become a long bench running along the face of the building. The bench is a place to sit and look across the courtyard, most of which contained, until about 1960, a reflecting pool. The limestone face at the base of the campanile is a mirror of the stonework across the stairs on the side face of the sanctuary.

The campanile is a 166-foot tall rectangular shaft of brick (right in photo 1). It is not ornamented, with the exception of a grid of large semi-translucent plastic panels near the top on the east and west sides. On the west side, one column of the panels is continued to within about 10 feet of grade. The original lattice-like brick infill was replaced with the plastic panels in 1976 because windblown rain was causing structural damage in the tower. The panels are molded to be reminiscent of the pattern of the brick infill. There is a wood door set off center in the north side. A clock of metal numerals and hands floats in front of the brick wall near the top on the north side. The north side of the campanile is on the same axis as the north face of the sanctuary.

The courtyard (photo 3) is sunken about 10 feet below the street, and is a very large space, faced on the east by the sanctuary, on the west by the Sunday school wing, and on the north and south by high stone-coped brick retaining walls. It is divided into two major sections by the bridge, a two-story portion of the building that links the sanctuary and chapel with the Sunday school. The bridge is supported on broad limestone-faced columns. As mentioned above, the court once had a reflecting pool in it. Maintenance problems led to the decision around 1960 to fill it with dirt, and the area is now a lawn. The pool filled most of the north part of the court. People were restricted to specific walkways along two edges. The south part of the sunken court is now a play area. It is a flat lawn with a few mature trees. The reception room and Sunday school classrooms open onto it.

The bridge (photo 3) consists of two stories of classrooms and offices off a wide single-loaded corridor. The corridor is on the south. The area under the bridge is a walkway between parts of the building, but it also functions as a two-sided loggia facing the different courtyards to north and south. In the north elevation of the bridge, the center portion, which corresponds to where the water of the reflecting pool was, has continuous horizontal ribbons of steel sash windows. Above the areas where the walkways intersect the bridge, the brick wall is ornamented with a grid of brick in slight relief, with windows set at intervals in the rectangles of the grid. The south elevation of the bridge is very similar to the north elevation, though the patterns on the walls are linear rather than gridded.

²Where oak is referred to as the wood species here, the writer has assumed it is white oak, though it may in fact be chestnut, which was in abundant supply at the time.

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 6

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

The twelve columns that support the bridge can be divided into two primary groups: on the north, against the former pool area, they are rectangular, in reference to the line of the water. On the south, where movement out of the loggia onto the lawn is encouraged, they are round or octagonal. Depending on its position, then, the column relates to the conditions within which it is placed. At the intersection of the walkway under the bridge and the walkway from the campanile stairs, the columns are paired. Those closest to the walkway are ornamented with linear patterns in relief. Low on the rectangular columns a small, ornamented sculpture base grows out toward the person walking toward it. A low stone bench is engaged with this column and the one it is paired with, marking a point from which to view the reflecting pool. Other columns are also modified from the established vocabulary in order to clarify aspects of their relationship with the space.

The Sunday school portion of the building (partially visible at far right of photo 1) is three stories high on the courtyard side. Viewed from the west, or Franklin Street side, this wing is two stories above ground level. A projecting, one-story section is integrated with the canopy for the entrance for this wing. The entrance is reached by a broad set of stone steps on Franklin Street. Windows on this section are horizontal bands of steel sash, as on the bridge.

The chapel sits directly behind the sanctuary. When viewed from the south, with the freestanding chimney that stands next to it, the chapel and chimney can be seen as small, mirror images of the sanctuary and campanile.

The interiors of First Christian are, with a few exceptions, minimally altered. In addition to having built-in elements, significant finishes, or other notable features, many spaces also have furnishings that were designed and made for the room. The design of many of these furnishings, such as the kidney-shaped tables in the kindergarten room, and the meeting table in the reception room, is ascribed to Charles Eames (1907-1978), who was a student at Cranbrook and an employee of Saarinen at the time. Many of the light fixtures were designed specifically for the building, and significant use is made of indirect light fixtures. The predominant materials inside are exposed brick, particularly in significant public spaces, and sanded plaster. Floors are carpeted, but most were originally vinyl asbestos tile, which remains in some areas. Some rooms have horizontal or vertical paneling of tongue in groove oak. In the first floor corridor, the paneling is vertical grain Douglas fir.

The vestibule is a large stone-floored room with a sloping ceiling and unpainted brick walls. It shares materials and details with the rest of the interior. The stone floor is a random pattern of rectangles of smooth waxed limestone. The brick of the walls is a lighter, pinker material than is used on the exterior (this is the case where brick is used throughout the interior).

The south wall, leading to the sanctuary, is a continuous screen of vertical round oak members, about three inches in diameter with five-inch spaces between. Obscure glass with horizontal leading is held between the wood members. These round wood pieces show up repeatedly throughout the interior, in the organ screen (left in photo 5), stair rails (photo 8), and elsewhere. The doors into the sanctuary are oak with long lozenge-shaped lights and leather-wrapped vertical pulls. A low oak screen near the west wall creates a cloak area and incorporates a tack surface for notices and guest register writing surface. The steps to the balcony are stone, with oak and stainless steel handrails. The ceiling slopes down toward the sanctuary, following the rake of the balcony above. Four stainless steel light fixtures are aimed at the ceiling.

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 7

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

The sanctuary (photo 5) is a high, rectangular volume running north and south. It is noted for its fine acoustics. There is a balcony at the rear over the vestibule. Floor-to-ceiling windows are set in deep brick embrasures on the west side (right in photo 5). The east side is open at the first floor level to a side aisle that leads to the rest of the church (see floor plan). Above the aisle opening runs a linear air diffuser, and above that, the wall is an interlocking stepped pattern of brick and acoustic plaster. On the rear (north) wall, at balcony level, a linear pattern of brick relief, similar to that used on the exterior, is infilled with square acoustic tiles. The acoustic tile infill appears to have been added. In the chancel, the walls are brick. The ceiling is made up of areas of two colors of acoustic plaster, also in interlocking stepped patterns. Large concentric stainless steel air diffusers are arranged in the ceiling. Ceiling-level lights are round recessed incandescent fixtures. The brick and plaster have all been painted. Information conflicts as to whether the brick was originally left unpainted.

The floor of the sanctuary aisles and chancel is the same random pattern of waxed limestone used in the vestibule. Beneath the pews, the floor is waxed cork.

Pews are arranged with the aisle off center. They are oak, with brown leather cushions.

The windows of the west wall are leaded in a random pattern of rectangles using an obscure glass. About four feet off the wall, in line with each masonry pier, is an asymmetric bowl-shaped indirect light fixture suspended on long stems about 16 feet above the floor and made of brushed stainless steel.

The chancel is an area of the sanctuary reached by several stone steps the width of the sanctuary. The floor level of this area is about four feet above the level of the rest of the sanctuary. In this area are the choir seating, pulpit, full-immersion baptismal font, and organ. The rear wall of the chancel is brick. Off center and high on the wall is a large Latin cross of stone in low relief. Below this, running the width of the chancel, is a screen of rounded oak rods that hide the baptismal font. Gates in the screen open when the font is in use. This wall is dramatically washed with light in the mornings by a high narrow window on the east side, which is hidden from view by the organ screen. In addition, a large skylight the width of the room is located immediately above.

On the west side of the chancel is the choir area: pews in a wood enclosure, facing east rather than toward the congregation. Above the choir hangs a large tapestry, "The Sermon on the Mount" (photo 6), designed by Eliel and Loja Saarinen and woven in Loja's workshop at Cranbrook Academy of Art.

The east wall of the chancel is the organ pipe screen (left in photo 5) made up of bullnosed pieces of wood about three inches across, held about one-and-a-half inches apart by wood spacers. The spacers do not always run continuously but form intermittent bands behind the more continuous surface created by the vertical members. The screen runs from about six feet above the floor to the ceiling.

In plan, the face of the organ screen continues into the piano-shape of the pulpit (photos 5 and 6), a wood piece made of vertically veneered oak that is cantilevered over the steps. A high blank

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 8

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

panel of wood is set as a foil behind the speaker's position. Immediately behind the pulpit is the organ console.

The chapel (photo 7) is a much smaller space than the sanctuary, and where the sanctuary is high and bright, the chapel is warmer and more intimate. This is partly due to the smaller windows, and the unpainted brick interior. The room is entered through the rear (north) wall, on the west side, under the side aisle; the columns are wrapped in leather. The floor throughout, including the podium, is waxed cork. The front (south) wall serves as a screen for the organ pipes and the baptismal font. This screen is made up of one-inch thick wood members of varying width, with radiused corners with interlinking blocks.

The auditorium is a room under the sanctuary and the same size in plan, but with lower ceiling. The floor level is several steps below the main floor level of the basement. It has a stage at the north end. The ceiling undulates, presumably for acoustic reasons. A platform near the rear is formed with an undulating wall. The stage extends beyond the proscenium to become a deeper platform at the west end. It transforms into a flight of steps to the floor level, and also wraps the corner to become a wide window ledge. The floor of the room is vinyl tile; the walls are mostly brick.

In the stairwells, Saarinen manipulated the round wood members seen in the vestibule and sanctuary as the vertical members of the beautifully sculptural guardrail system (photo 8). The guardrails are made up of vertical wood members that support a delicate handrail, and extend up or down past the floor slab to support wing-shaped wood troughs for indirect lighting. Stainless steel rods connect the members horizontally, and stainless steel is used for all the little machined connectors and spacers that the system requires.

The church building and its site were created as a composite ground lane pattern on two levels. The lower level consists of a congregational courtyard and reflecting pool. Walkways on the lower level consist of paved panels spaced with turf, creating a pattern similar to the brick and glass detailing of the building.

The upper level consists primarily of sidewalk accesses to the church and planted setbacks. The brick retaining wall of the courtyard extends above street level and creates an overlook. A rectilinear yet informal bosque of sugar maples extends beyond this wall along Fifth Street. A sitting area on the northwest corner of the site has original benches bounded by winged euonymus.

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 9

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:
 Nationally: X Statewide: ___ Locally: ___

Applicable National Register Criteria: A___ B___ CX D___

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): AX B___ C___ D___ E___ F___ G___

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Criteria Exclusions: N/A

NHL Theme(s): III. Expressing Cultural Values
 V. Architecture, Landscape Architecture

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1942

Significant Dates: 1942

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Saarinen, Gottlieb Eliel
 Pierre and Wright (Associate Architect)
 Chas. R. Wermuth & Son Inc (Contractor)

Historic Contexts: XVI. Architecture
 Z. Modern

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 10

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

First Christian Church is nationally significant under Criterion 4 in the area of Architecture. The building relates to the Multiple Property Listing, "Modernism in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Design, and Art in Bartholomew County, 1942-1965," and to the Historic Context, "Modern Architecture and Landscape Architecture in Bartholomew County, 1942-1965." It is one of the first Modern religious buildings in America, and an outstanding example of the work of Eliel Saarinen (1873-1950), a leading architect of the Modernist movement. The building was nationally recognized at the time of its construction, and had an impact on church design in the United States in the post-World War II era. First Christian Church is also important as the first Modern building in Columbus, Indiana, a city that would become famous for its Modern architecture.

The congregation of the church was organized in 1855 as the Tabernacle Church of Christ. A brick, Gothic Revival style building was constructed in 1878 on Lafayette Avenue, on part of the site now occupied by Cleo Rogers Memorial Library. This structure housed the church for the next 64 years. By the late 1930s, the congregation had identified a need for a new, larger church building.

In 1937, William G. Irwin and his sister, Linnie I. Sweeney, purchased the block bounded by Franklin, Fifth, Lafayette, and Fourth Streets, and donated it for the new church. In the nineteenth century, this block had been called "Railroad Square," and was the location of a depot and warehouses. After the rail line and depot were relocated around the turn of the century, the railroad company put the land up for sale, but allowed the city to maintain it as a landscaped open space known as "Commercial Park."

A church member who was familiar with Cranbrook Academy of Art suggested Eliel Saarinen, the architect who served as its director. Mrs. Hugh Miller, a member of the building committee, had read a book that characterized Saarinen as Finland's greatest architect, and decided to pursue this recommendation.

After making an appointment, Mrs. Miller traveled with her brother to Michigan to meet with Saarinen. Initially, the architect said he was not interested in designing a religious building, that American churches were too theatrical. Mrs. Miller replied that the congregation did not want that kind of church. "Our town is small and there are all sorts and conditions of men. While we should like the church to be beautiful, we do not want the first reaction to be, how much did the church cost? We want the poorest women in town to feel at home there."³

After Saarinen agreed to design the building, he received a letter from the building committee. Rather than giving the architect specific requirements, the letter affirmed elements of the congregation's faith as guidance in the design. Part of the letter read:

³ Elsie Irwin Sweeney, "Symbolism of the First Christian Church" (unpublished manuscript in Cleo Rogers Memorial Library Architectural Archive).

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 11

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

We believe that a church building can be created which will surround us in our worship with Christian feeling and which will produce in us and in our descendants a Christian consciousness that will be hard to lose. It should be built to last a long time.

As there is permanence in our faith, so should there be permanence in our church house. Great buildings dominate and influence the lives of all who live near them. A church which embodies and illustrates the truths of Christianity should be a monument in which the affection and aspiration of many generations of Christians are centered.⁴

After the design of the building had been approved by the building committee, Saarinen met with groups of church members to answer their questions. The questions with Saarinen's answers were compiled in booklet form and distributed. Several questions related to the building design. When asked if the design was right for the congregation, Saarinen answered:

As we compare this development of your church with that of the new architectural thought – according to which order your church design is conceived – we find that they are very much alike both as to meaning and course of development, for, as your church emancipated itself from traditional theology, so the new architectural thought has freed itself from traditional styles.⁵

To those who wondered if a historical design would have been more appropriate for a church Saarinen responded with these often quoted words:

Our forefathers and we ourselves have been using the dead styles of alien cultures. We have been using these styles in every conceivable manner; we have remodeled them to serve any purpose, no matter whether they were appropriate for that purpose or not; we have combined them in thousands of different ways until the last drop of expressiveness has been squeezed out of these once so expressive styles.⁶

According to her grandson J. Irwin Miller, Mrs. Sweeney, the widow of long-time pastor Z.T. Sweeney did not expect to like the building, but she trusted Saarinen. Miller recalled, "That was pretty much the attitude of the building committee, which was really composed of older people at that time. They were impressed by him personally."⁷

Even before the building was completed it received attention in the national press. *Time* magazine reported in January of 1941, "The costliest modern church in the world, planned by Europe's most famous modern architect and his son, is going up across the street from a Victorian city hall and a conventional Carnegie library in Columbus, Ind."⁸

Newsweek waited two months after the first sermon in May of 1942 before reacting: "In style, the new Tabernacle is utterly unlike the seventeen other churches in Columbus or, for that matter,

⁴ Tabernacle Church of Christ, Building Committee Booklet, c.1940.

⁵ Tabernacle Church of Christ, Building Committee Booklet, c.1940.

⁶ Tabernacle Church of Christ, Building Committee Booklet, c.1940.

⁷ J. Irwin Miller. Interview with Louis Joyner and Laura Thayer, 8 June 1999.

⁸ "Piety in Brick." *Time* (27 January 1941).

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 12

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

in almost any other city in the world.” According to the article, nearly 10,000 visitors had signed the church register in the first six weeks after it opened.⁹

A reporter for the publication, *Christian Century*, who visited the church two years after its completion, wrote of its popularity in the community. The lead paragraph for his article read, “Today, on the second anniversary of its dedication, the most daring innovation in American church architecture can be said to have won the enthusiastic approval of the congregation which it serves and of the city which it distinguishes.”¹⁰

Eliel Saarinen was the principal architect for First Christian Church. Saarinen was an internationally respected architect, city planner, and educator at the time he was commissioned to design the building. He was born and educated in Finland. While attending the Polytechnic Institute at Helsingfors, from which he was graduated in 1897, he was also a painting student at University Art School. Following his education, he formed a partnership with two other architects, Herman Gesellius and Armas Lindgren. He started an independent practice in 1907.

Saarinen’s early work included the Finnish Pavilion for the Paris Exposition of 1900, and the National Museum (1902). His most famous building in Finland was the Helsinki Train Station, completed in 1906. In 1922, Saarinen won second place in the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition. Saarinen’s design was widely admired and was more influential in twentieth century skyscraper design than the building that was ultimately constructed, the first place design of John Mead Howells (1868-1959) and Raymond Hood (1881-1934). Saarinen came to the United States to receive his prize, and stayed, becoming a professor of architecture at the University of Michigan and urban planning consultant to the City of Chicago.

In 1924, George Booth, father of one of Saarinen’s students, asked him to take on the directorship of a new school he had founded in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, called Cranbrook Academy of Art (NHL, 1989). The premise of the school was architecture in collaboration with other arts: cabinet making, iron work, bookbinding, sculpture, silversmithing, printing, weaving, furniture making, ceramics, landscape architecture, and interior design. Saarinen agreed to take the job. He also set up an architectural practice in Bloomfield Hills but was limited in the number of commissions he could accept because of his work at Cranbrook. In addition to serving as the school’s director, he designed almost all the buildings that were constructed for the complex between 1926 and 1943. Among the best known of these are Kingswood School for Girls (1929), Cranbrook School for Boys (1930), and Cranbrook Academy of Art (1941).

Cranbrook was in many ways the United States version of the Bauhaus. Both schools emphasized integration of all design arts; both had talented faculty who were the early leaders of the Modern movement; and both produced students who went on to become highly accomplished in their fields. An important difference between the two schools was that the Bauhaus glorified the machine, while Cranbrook emphasized humanism and craftsmanship. Among Cranbrook luminaries were designer Charles Eames (1907-78), sculptor Harry Bertoina (1915-78); and architects Charles Bassett (1921-1999), Paul Kennon (1934-1990), and Harry Weese (1915-1998).

⁹ “Modernistic House of God.” *Newsweek* (27 July 1942).

¹⁰ “Saarinen Church Liked.” *Christian Century* (14 June 1944).

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 13

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Saarinen formed a partnership with his son Eero in 1937. The firm of Saarinen and Saarinen designed several distinguished and influential buildings including Kleinhaus Music Hall in Buffalo, New York (1938) (NHL, 1989); Crow Island School in Winnetka, Illinois (1939) (NHL, 1990); Tanglewood Opera House in Lenox, Massachusetts (1944); and Christ Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota (1949). One of their finest works, the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan (1957), was completed after Eliel Saarinen's death.

Eliel Saarinen is considered one of the greatest architects of the twentieth century, and an early master of Modernism. The universal respect afforded him is reflected in the many honors and awards he received. Among these were:

- Bronze, Silver, and Gold medals of the State of Finland (1900)
- Gold Medal, Leipzig Exhibition, Germany (1913)
- Gold medal of the Architectural League of New York (1934)
- Academic Architects Society Medal, Copenhagen (1939)
- Elected to the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects (1944)
- Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects (1947)
- Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects

In addition, Saarinen received honorary doctorates from six colleges and universities, including the University of Michigan (1933) and Harvard University (1940). He was made an honorary member of numerous distinguished professional organizations, among them the Imperial Academy of Art in St. Petersburg (1906), Deutsche Werkbund (1913), the Royal Institute of British Architects (1924), and the Central Institute of Architects of Brazil (1931).

First Christian Church was one of two churches designed by Saarinen and Saarinen. The other was Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis, Minnesota (1948). Eliel Saarinen is not credited with any other religious buildings in the United States. A church he designed for a congregation in Cincinnati in 1949 was not built.

In addition to his son Eero, others involved in the design of First Christian Church included Charles Eames, who designed the children's furniture; and Saarinen's wife Loja, who assisted him in the design of the large tapestry in the sanctuary ("The Sermon on the Mount"), and directed its weaving in her studio at Cranbrook. Sculptures by Carl Milles (1875-1955) were to have been installed on the small limestone pedestals on the exterior of the building (see Section 7, Description), but shortages with the onset of World War II made procurement of the necessary materials impossible.

Associate Architect for First Christian Church was the firm of Pierre and Wright of Indianapolis. The firm was established in 1925 by partners Edward Dienhart Pierre (1890-1971) and George Caleb Wright (1889-1973). Important commissions included Perry Stadium (1931) and the Indiana State Library and Historical Building (1934), both of which are in Indianapolis and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The partnership was dissolved in 1944.

First Christian Church illustrates Eliel Saarinen's genius in building composition and urban design. The relationship of the building and the site's open space, as well as the manner in which the total work relates to the surrounding urban fabric, are among the structure's strongest points. The exterior materials extend into the interior of the building. For example, the limestone on

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 14

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

exterior steps is carried into the sanctuary, exterior brick is used as an interior material, and the asymmetrically placed cross on the main façade is repeated in the sanctuary.

The building is a culmination of Saarinen's long career, and exhibits many elements that reflect his architectural preferences and philosophies. For example, the texture created through subtle modulation of masonry coursing emphasizes his preference for craftsman over machine. His belief in the place of ornament in Modern architecture is exhibited in designs on limestone panels on the principal façade, in the columns in the sunken courtyard, and elsewhere in the building. Though ornament was rejected by many Modernists, Saarinen called it "the poetry of form."¹¹

Many believe that First Christian Church is a synthesis of the work of Eliel and Eero Saarinen, and of their independent architectural approaches: Eliel's focus on materials, craft, and relationship of the building to the user; and Eero's Modern aesthetic. In his book on Eliel Saarinen, Albert Christ-Janer speculated on the relationship between the two architects: "Such harmonization would not be possible were it not for the fact that, in years of working together, the two designers became perfectly attuned to each other. Since both designers were strongly individual, neither was ever a secondary partner. The collaboration was possible only because father and son were in intellectual and spiritual accord."¹²

Prior to First Christian Church, there was a strong tradition in the United States in ecclesiastical architecture to embrace historical forms and ornament. More than in the case of other building types, it seems to have been difficult for congregations to reject the architectural traditions that had spanned generations. Even though First Christian was praised by architectural critics at the time of its construction, several years passed before Modernism was generally accepted in religious buildings.

¹¹ Eliel Saarinen. *A Search for Form*. (New York, 1948).

¹² Albert Christ-Janer. *Eliel Saarinen*. (Chicago, 1948).

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 15

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

Previously Listed in the National Register.

Designated a National Historic Landmark.

Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State Agency

Federal Agency

Local Government

University

Other (Specify Repository):

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 16

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 4 acres

UTM Reference: **Zone Easting Northing**

16 593340 4339650

Verbal Boundary Description:

That block which is bounded by Fourth, Franklin, Fifth, and Lafayette streets

Boundary Justification:

This is the historic 1942 boundary for the property. It is a full city block that contains the building, sunken courtyard and surrounding plantings and walks that historically have been a part of First Christian Church and that maintain historic integrity.

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 17

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Laura Thayer, Architectural Historian
Louis Joyner, Architect
Malcolm Cairns, Landscape Architect
Organization: Storrow Kinsella Partnership Inc.

Address: 212 West Tenth Street
Studio A440 Stutz Center
Indianapolis, IN 46202

Phone: 317-639-3420

Edited by: Patricia Henry, National Historic Landmark Survey (202) 343-8163
Carolyn Pitts, National Historic Landmarks Survey (215) 597-8875
Beth L. Savage, National Register of Historic Places (202) 343-9540

National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW, NC400
Washington, DC 20240