

How Chapel House Came to Be

by John Ross Carter, Director Emeritus of Chapel House

In November of 1956 a letter was sent to a woman in her late eighties who had recently endowed the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University and the Fund for the Study of the Great Religions of the World at Colgate, asking if she would contribute the funds needed to build and endow a place such as Chapel House was to become. It was described as a place that would help anyone seeking religious insight by making available the religious books people have found most helpful, a collection of recordings of religious music, examples of the best religious art obtainable, a chapel for meditation and religious devotions, and peaceful facilities for guests to stay a few days or weeks to carry on their religious search.

All major religious traditions would be represented in the books, the music, and the art. Chapel House would welcome anyone who was willing to take the initiative to read the books, listen to the music, study the works of art, to meditate or pray in the chapel, and to learn to live in privacy and silence. There would be no *guru*, no master teacher; the visitor at Chapel House would find guidance in the books, the music, and the works of art that have been proven by time to be great teachers. It would not be a center for religious activities; there would be no regular seminars, classes, conferences, or organized retreats. The only requirement of visitors or guests would be that they would not interfere in any way with others who are using the facilities of Chapel House.

The donor was a woman who early in her life had discovered, in what she described as a time of spiritual dryness and doubt, that the study of the writings, the music, the art, and the discipline of religious traditions other than her own, illuminated and gave new vitality to her faith as a Christian. As soon as she received the letter and the request she telephoned to say that she was excited at the prospect of creating such a place as Chapel House. She wondered, though, if it could be done at Colgate. She had never visited the University but had always heard of it as a football school noted for its unrestrained fraternity life (this was the mid 1950s). She was assured that Colgate would welcome such a religious center, but that since its use would be experimental and not a part of the academic curriculum, it would have to be financed and endowed so it would not require support from University funds. She said she had a fund available that would make it possible to start at once, and agreed to support the building of Chapel House and to give a modest endowment for its upkeep.

She made two conditions for the gift: her name was never to be mentioned, and she must approve the architectural plans. Her name was not to be revealed because, she said, "I am an old woman and soon I shall be going over to the other side where I will see all my friends. If I had done something for the Lord and added my name to it, I'd be ashamed to see them." As for the architectural plans, she pointed out that she was a difficult person with architects, having had seven of them in succession when she built her house, and then had to finish it herself without one.

In the beginning the project was referred to as the Upstate New York Meditation Center, but it soon became apparent that the name was misleading because of the ambiguity in the minds of many people as to the meaning of the word “meditation” and because most Americans would understand such a title to suggest primarily “foreign” or “Eastern” practices. It was called Chapel House because it is a chapel and a house, and since it is unique, those straightforward words help to avoid preconceptions about what happens at Chapel House and the discoveries of men and women who take advantage of what is available here.

The architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill was chosen because one of the partners was particularly sensitive to the religious aims of such a building. It was agreed that, since it was hoped that people from all religious traditions, or none, would feel at home in Chapel House, various traditional religious symbols would be available among the works of art in the house. Chapel House should be a beautiful place where guests could read its books, listen to music, see works of religious art, find privacy and quiet, meditate and pray. It would have to speak for itself, so anyone who came to Chapel House would discover what it is and what they, themselves, could become in response to this discovery. The architect was responsible for the building plans, all furnishings, and also the landscaping. The campus site was chosen by the architects, only a few minutes’ walk from the classrooms, but isolated and quiet. The University promised that future expansion would not encroach on Chapel House.

The Lady, whose desire to remain anonymous was respected, was kept informed of the architect’s progress. As the plans were nearing completion, she was sent a report in which it was mentioned that Skidmore, Owings & Merrill were being honored at the Museum of Modern Art with an exhibition of models of their new Chase Manhattan Bank Building and the Air Force Academy. She immediately telephoned to say that she did not see how architects who would allow their work to be shown in the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) could create anything she could approve, for that museum had never shown anything she would go across the street to see. It was therefore with some trepidation that the plans were submitted to her a few weeks later, complete with a beautiful model and examples of the mosaic and cathedral glass to be used in the chapel. She listened without comment to the detailed explanation of the plans, then she remained silent a long time, looking at the model, and finally said, “Well, it still looks to me very much like a greenhouse . . . but we’ll go ahead.”

Unfortunately, the Lady did not live to see the completed building. A few years after Chapel House was completed her lawyer, in his seventies, visited Chapel House. As he walked from the car toward the house he said, “The Lady would not have liked it, you know. She often told me so.” He stayed overnight, and the next day as he was walking back to the car he turned, looked at Chapel House for a long time, then said, “I’m sure she would have loved it.”

The architects had hoped to use stone from Colgate’s quarry further up the hill for the exterior but found that it would be much too expensive to import the labor and equipment needed, so the stone came from a quarry near Yonkers, New York. The

Italian masons from New York, artisans in working with stone, used the stone as it came with as little shaping as possible, avoiding curved lines, not letting a horizontal line run more than about three feet.

The building was constructed by Barr & Barr, who sent one of their best foremen, a man who inspired his crew with such pride that many of them brought their friends and families to Chapel House to see their work. Careless workmen were replaced; imperfect materials were returned to the supplier. The men were aware that they were making a building that would be cherished for many years.

The library was designed for approximately three thousand books with the expectation that the collection would not greatly exceed that size. The chairs were designed for Chapel House by the architects, the angles and the cushions changed until a compromise was reached that was acceptable to half a dozen people of varying heights, and with wings to give the reader a sense of privacy. The tables in the dining room are unfinished elm, taking a soft patina with use. The rooms downstairs are as small as possible, providing a bed, a chair, and a desk; the concrete block walls were carefully laid by the workmen as an example of their skill as artisans, using only perfect blocks. Each room has a private bath, not as a luxury, but because guests at Chapel House are promised complete privacy and quiet.

The chapel was designed primarily for individual use for meditation and private devotions. The extra chairs are provided in case it might be used for weddings and other services, up to fifty people. The stalls make it possible for several people to sit quietly in the chapel at the same time without disturbing each other. In a small chapel, a person entering and seeing someone present might prefer to leave lest the first person there be disturbed; but if there are stalls one knows that it is always possible to go quietly to the chapel without intruding. The two oratories offer complete privacy under any circumstances.

The side walls of the chapel are of German cathedral glass, two panels of glass set about two feet apart, sand-blasted on the inside to diffuse the light, with heat coming up between the glass walls, when needed, and lights between the walls for illumination at night. The color of the glass has no religious significance. The architects wanted side walls of thin translucent stone but that was too expensive, so they chose glass that would produce a somewhat similar soft glow. The reredos is of Italian mosaic, about a dozen different colors, roughened by hitting with a hammer before the cement backing had set. The cross was made by the foreman of the construction crew who spent a Saturday shaping it as his contribution to Chapel House. The ark, altar and pulpit, which are behind the reredos, and can be moved to the front, were designed by the architects. There are also a piano and electric organ located there which can be used appropriately for a service. The architects wanted the stone floor to be a random pattern so they drew a plan that they could approve as truly random and had the stone cut to fit. The ceiling was hung to break the box-like feeling of the room, giving a line that carries the eye to the reredos and making all lines in the walls seem to continue. The light from over the cross adds a quality of spaciousness to the room. Chairs, rather than pews, were provided because the chapel is primarily for

individual use; they were designed for meditation so the spine is held straight, making it possible to sit motionless for long periods of time. Every detail of the chapel was worked out carefully to make it a room that invites worship. The chapel has not been dedicated after the manner of any religious ritual of any religious tradition or denomination; it is consecrated, rather, by the persons who use it.

The first guest at Chapel House was a Burmese Buddhist monk, a Bhikkhu, who came in the spring of 1959. There have been guests from Africa, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Burma (Myanmar), Canada, China, Egypt, England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, India, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, Vietnam. They have been Episcopalian, Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Quaker, Baptist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Unitarian, Jewish, Shinto, Muslim (both Shi'a and Sunni), Hindu, Jain, Buddhist (Mahāyāna and Theravāda), Tibetan, Shinshū, Nichirenshū and Zen), and people with no religious affiliation. Guests have been high school and college students, teachers and professors, business and professional people, farmers and mothers and fathers, rabbis, priests, monks and nuns, and ministers. They have stayed at Chapel House from two days to two months.

Chapel House has not published the names of its visitors and guests for it promises privacy; nor has it published statistics about the number of guests who come here. The Lady who gave the original gift that made Chapel House possible once remarked, with a twinkle in her eyes, "If one person a year comes to Chapel House and uses it for the purposes we have in mind in building it, we will have had a good income on our investment."

No effort is made to interview guests about whether or not Chapel House is serving the purposes for which it was created, but there are frequent indications that it is helping some people to discover new dimensions in their search for insight. Chapel House seeks to make available the best religious insights as transmitted by the great religious teachers from all traditions, and leaves it to the seeker to make the discovery.

Slowly, over the years, more and more people have seen Chapel House, and have encouraged their friends to see it. More and more people have discovered in the books at Chapel House ideas they had not known before, in the works of art insights they had never imagined; in the music, dimensions of feeling and appreciation they had not dreamed of; in the privacy and silence of their room an openness they had not experienced before; and in the chapel, new disciplines of meditation and prayer and new depths of devotion.