

## Byzantine Architecture in Charleston, SC

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Frederica in Orthodoxy, Arts, Podcast

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Frederica Mathewes-Green: Today is a Sunday, and I am in Holy Ascension OCA Church in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, right outside of Charleston. This is a very unusual church building. This was just consecrated last May, and I am speaking with the architect, Andrew Gould. You look to me like quite a young man, Andrew. Is this your first church building?

Andrew Gould: Yes, it is.

FMG: Where did you go to architecture school?

AG: University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

FMG: Okay. Were you Orthodox at the time?

AG: Not when I was studying architecture. My wife and I converted to Orthodoxy four years ago when we arrived in Charleston and started designing this church.

FMG: Tell me something about... this is an unusual church building to me, when I look at it. It's like a miniature cathedral. It's very very high, but it fits on a pretty small lot here. Everything that meets the eye here is Byzantine- the dome, the cross-shaped floor plan- but it's also Southern. The floor here is just yellow pine, isn't it? A knotty yellow pine. We've got hand carved door pulls there. I remember seeing in the memorial book at the time of the consecration that the shape, that sort of 'C' shaped wooden pull on the door is inspired by a particular handle on a particular door in the mountains of Tennessee. So you've tried to blend these two things- Southern and Byzantine. Tell me more about that.

AG: Well, I believe that it's important for Orthodox churches in America to look American as well as Orthodox in some very specific ways, when you consider that Orthodox churches in all of the Old World countries have certain common factors, but they also have certain nationally specific styles and elements to them. The most obvious example is when Russia inherited Orthodoxy they also inherited Byzantine architecture, but the Russians did not build exactly the same way that the Byzantines had built. They had much taller proportions typically, which can be

seen as a reflection of the flatness of the Russian landscape; the onion domes are a reaction to snow, to have the pointed top to shed snow; they would build out of brick and plaster, because they have no stone that's quarried in Russia. You'll see nationally specific elements like this that relate to the climate, the geography and the history of each Orthodox country. So when I set out to design this church, I tried to think, what would it have been like if Orthodox immigrants had arrived in Charleston, South Carolina in the 18th or early 19th century. It's very advantageous to us, being in an old city—downtown Charleston is largely 18th century buildings, and the people who built them were largely immigrants from England or Holland or the Caribbean Islands. So you can very easily see in the architecture of Charleston how they would bring their traditions from the old world, but then they would adapt them to the climate and the materials that were available to them here in Charleston. So I simply imagined, what would it be like if there were an 18th century Orthodox church in Charleston. So the sort of indigenous materials that were used in this building—in terms of the exterior of the building, the building is stuccoed and painted a bright color because that's very typical of the old houses of Charleston.

FMG: Bright yellow, almost a mustard yellow.

AG: Yeah. The copper roof is typical of Charleston, and then on the inside, as you mentioned, we have these Southern yellow pine floors, which is ubiquitous in the South. Also, pine doors, with these wooden handles. A lot of the details are just sort of simple vernacular details that you would find on a Southern house. Actually, they're more typical of what you'd find on a poor man's Southern house rather than an high-style classical house like a mansion in Charleston. We did that because the simple details that you would find in a poor man's house are actually very consistent with what you'd find in a medieval church in the Old World.

FMG: So those churches were often built from poor man's materials as well, everyone in the community having to band together and give whatever they were able—sort of a 'stone soup' approach to architecture. What were some of the challenges you had here? I see for example these capitals and columns—these are made of cement or concrete, aren't they? And yet they have kind of a mottled effect of the grey-green paint. They're very convincing but I don't know how you did it.

AG: Well, ideally they would be polished marble. We looked into that but we found that we couldn't afford it, so I had a fiberglass mold made from a wooden column and used that fiberglass mold to pour these out of concrete, and then I carved a wooden mold for the Byzantine-style capitals and cast those, and did some

additional hand-carving on them in order to get the fine detail. So the form of the column is a pretty good replica of a sixth century Byzantine column.

FMG: It's based on a specific column?

AG: It's most closely based on the columns at the Basilica of St. John in Ephesus which was built by Justinian around 560 AD.

FMG: And the capitals, are they specific, or are they just sort of a...

AG: Well, again, the capitals are very close to the capitals of that church also in Ravenna. The sixth century churches also have capitals in this style. It's what's called an Ionic Impost capital, with the Ionic scrolls, like a classical Greek capital, but they're sort of diminutive, and overwhelmed by the big inverted pyramid impost block that sits on top of them and has a sixth century cross carved into it. This capital was developed in the sixth century as a graceful way of supporting arches in a thick wall. Greek architecture, ancient Greek architecture of course, didn't have arches, but in late Roman times, as they developed these very thick walls and big arches, they had to redesign the classical capital and put this huge impost block on top in order to widen the top of the column enough to receive the thick arch.

FMG: Before I became Orthodox, anytime I thought of arches, I thought of pointy Gothic arches. These are the round arches that, in Europe, I know are called Romanesque. Tell me something about the difference- and do you think there's a theological difference between rounded shapes, the rounded dome, versus the kind of pointy, drawing to a peak, Gothic structure that came almost a thousand years later, I guess.

AG: There is a subtle theological difference. It's something that it's easier to see than to describe in words. Not all theological explanation can be reduced to a verbal expression. You can kind of feel in your heart in a Gothic church that it's pointing outside of itself- it's often said that a Gothic church is pointing to God, up to Heaven, and a Gothic church has kind of the appearance of tree branches. It's kind of a perfection of nature, you might say. It looks like the forms and beauty of the earth being perfected and lifted up as a monument to God.

FMG: Almost like a Platonic tree.

AG: Yeah. Exactly right. But there's not very much sense in Gothic architecture of God being within the church. Byzantine architecture is much more introverted. It's

womb-like. The arches fold back down on themselves and all the surfaces are painted with icons rather than carved with stone ornaments, as they would be in a Gothic church. So there's a sense in Orthodoxy of God dwelling with men, within the temple, that the temple itself is Heaven, and you don't have to be mindful of what's above or outside the church when you're inside it. So that's one point about the arches. Another interesting thing about Byzantine arches is that they're actually not exactly the same shape as Romanesque arches. Romanesque arches are typically a half circle— it's 180 degrees, whereas Byzantine arches tend to be a little bit taller; they go more straight up vertical, then they have the half circle, then they come straight down vertical again. They're a little bit more than half of a circle. It's been hypothesized that this form of a semicircle above a square is a symbol of the uniting of Heaven and Earth, in the same way that the whole form of a Byzantine church represents Heaven and Earth united. As in a church, the square plan of the church, the square floor, represents the Earth; the semicircular dome represents Heaven. The circular dome and the square floor come together as Heaven and Earth united, and the dome is supported by four columns, which divides the space of the nave into the form of a cross. So Byzantine architecture in its very form shows that the Cross is what structurally allows Heaven and Earth to come together, and there's a great deal of theological expression in that. Every time you see an arch in a Byzantine church it has this same proportion of the semicircle on top of the square. And so you can see every single arch, every little niche, every little proskomedia shelf that has that shape- every one of those is that same little symbolic gesture of Heaven and Earth united.

FMG: I had never thought of that. I'd never noticed. It is a pretty tall arch, even though the whole top part of it is pretty exactly round. I also had some questions about the colors chosen in here- I'm used to coming into a new church before it receives the full complement of icons, and seeing a bright white. But the interior here is a sandy color, and it's not uniform. It sort of goes from almost an off-white to almost a beige, I guess. Tell me about that choice.

AG: Well, this church is one of very few in America that actually has a lime plaster interior, rather than sheetrock. It's a masonry building, the plaster is applied directly to the masonry walls. It's entirely solid. We did this partly because the plaster is much more beautiful than sheetrock, and partly because it gives a much better substrate for painting iconography, something more akin to true fresco. In terms of the color of the plaster, that's based on what I saw when I visited Russia. A lot of the churches in Russia that have recently been restored have had 19th Century iconography scraped off of them, and they've had new plaster put on in preparation for more medieval style iconography that will come someday, and in

Russia when they make plaster, one of the ingredients is brick dust. It gives the plaster a slightly brownish pinkish color. It's very attractive. It's much gentler and warmer than a bright white interior. So I wanted to replicate that here. So as the batches of plaster were being mixed up, I had them add a little bit of iron oxide pigment to the mix to give it that slightly brownish color. I deliberately did not let them measure the amounts carefully, so that each batch would come out very slightly different, and it gives it this marbled handmade appearance, which makes for a warm interior.

FMG: Yes, it really does. I was wondering to what extent was the invention of domes an acoustic concern? Was it mostly theological, or do you think that a lot of the reason was when you couldn't hear the priest? This does tend to gather the sound more.

AG: I would say it's probably not an acoustical decision, because in an early Byzantine church when domes were invented back in the fifth, sixth century in Christian architecture, the domes are usually so high above the ground, in a Byzantine church, that they really don't have much acoustical effect. Hagia Sophia is an exception; that dome is proportionately low to the ground, but Hagia Sophia is such a large building that you would have to shout very loud for sound to even make it up to the dome and back down again. But certainly the plaster and the marble paneling of a Byzantine church has much more to do with amplifying the sound than the shape of the church.

FMG: Surfaces for it to bounce off of. Is the altar also made of Southern pine?

AG: Yes it is. That altar is loosely based on a design that comes from Alaska. It has four wooden posts and it has a sort of X-brace between the legs and a cross standing on that X-brace, so the cross is sort of in the center of the volume of the altar.

FMG: We have a similar altar table at Holy Cross, I think it's mahogany, but it's the same plan, I think developed by St. Tikhon. For areas where there really was not quarried stone available, that they would make an altar out of the local wood, whatever local wood was available. In our church anyway, the relics for the altar are inside the cross. There's a hole drilled through the top of it. Is that the case here as well?

AG: Well, that was the intention. A cross was prepared for that, although when the bishop came, he wanted to put the relics in the top of the altar. I'm not sure why.

FMG: What a bishop wants, he gets. And do you anticipate the expected icon scheme here, the standing Virgin of the Sign behind the altar, and the Christ Pantocrator in the dome?

AG: Yeah, it'll be the classic iconography scheme. We anticipate the wall painting to begin probably in about a year and a half. We've exhausted our funds building the building and we have to launch a new fundraising campaign to pay for the iconography.

FMG: And the iconography will be painted directly on the walls? It won't be done in a studio and applied to the walls.

AG: That's right. And the paint we're going to use is called silicate paint- that's a paint that was developed in Germany in the 1850's as an alternative to fresco that will hold up in a wet climate, and it has the advantage that you can paint it on dry plaster, which speeds up the painting work a great deal. But in terms of the technique and appearance, it's almost indistinguishable from true fresco.

FMG: It makes it harder I guess if you have to put scaffolding in the church and have people lying on their backs way up at the dome, but it's all contributing to a church that is so impressive. Now, you don't live here, right? You live in Vermont?

AG: No, I live here.

FMG: You live here! You're a member of this church. Well, there you go. Has this unusual church in this location- do you see people, just citizens of Charleston coming to see it? Has it brought some attention to Orthodoxy just by being an attractive building? Curiosity?

AG: Oh yes, absolutely. It's gotten a good deal of attention among architectural historians and architects in Charleston. It's been written up in the newspaper several times, just because it's- not just because it's unusual to see a Byzantine style building being built, but also because it's so unusual to see a solid masonry building being built, that just the construction technique itself has been getting a lot of attention. And yes, in terms of just people passing by, we have a lot of people come in who are just stopped dead, you know, stopped mute when they walk through the door. They've just never seen anything that looks like such a holy space inside. It always surprises me, coming from the northeast, where beautiful churches are all over the place, but in the southeast, most people have never in their life even set foot in a traditional church building of any style. They're used to very plain,

simple Protestant churches, and they're just astonished to see this building.

FMG: It's pretty amazing. I should say a word about the setting. This neighborhood is called I'on, and it's one of the more high-priced of the Charleston developments around suburban communities, because it tries very hard (and I would say succeeds) in looking like the old city. It looks like the area south of Broad on the peninsula, the tip of the peninsula, with multi-colored houses close together, the 'single house' that's only one room wide, for example, very familiar styles of Charleston architecture. And there is nothing that doesn't fit that. It is all very carefully controlled. I forget the name of the development firm, but they also developed- what was it called in Florida, Sea Pines? It was used in 'The Truman Show'. It was the place 'The Truman Show' used as their set.

AG: Yeah, Seaside, Florida. Yeah, it's actually a different developer who built I'on, but it's the same movement. They're both among the earliest and best developments of what's called the New Urbanist Movement, of trying to build new neighborhoods that resemble traditional urban settings, eschewing the sprawl of modern suburbs.

FMG: And they are beautiful places. The use of the one, the development in Florida was used in 'The Truman Show' almost to make it look strange and unnaturally purified and unrealistic, but the New Urbanist movement is something I admire a lot, and as you drive through this place, I'on, you have this uncanny sense that you actually are in old Charleston. Well, that was what surprised me. I think that you had a wonderful gift in the land, I think you've had many wonderful gifts to be able to afford this in the first place. But I thought, why would they allow this? It doesn't look like old Charleston. But there was something about it- you passed through all those boards of review I guess, and it was approved to actually have this structure here.

AG: Well, it didn't quite happen the way you would expect. When the developer, whose name is Vince Graham, laid out the street plan for this neighborhood, he set aside several lots as civic-zoned lots, which basically could only be used to build either a church or a school or a community center, or something to that effect. And it was his hope that many churches would want to build in I'on, and he hoped this because it's intrinsic to a traditional neighborhood that it would have churches in it, and that people would walk rather than drive to go to church. He was disappointed because none of the churches in this area were willing or were at all interested in setting up a mission parish here, and the reason is that they all have a mega-church mindset. They told him that if they were to open a new church, it would have to

seat two thousand people and have a huge parking lot and so forth, and there was no way they were going to invest any effort into a little neighborhood church for a hundred people. Well, some representatives from our church, which was meeting in a temporary space elsewhere in the town, heard about this and decided to approach Vince Graham, and asked him, how would you feel about us building a little Orthodox church here? And he said that would be great, what would it look like? And they said, well, you have your neighborhood standards, we could keep it very tame. It would be wooden and back in the woods, and would it be all right if it had an onion dome on top? And Vince replied, I'm only going to let you build a church here if it's the biggest and most impressive building around, and has a gilded onion dome on top. And that was wonderful, because Vince Graham is very visionary and very bold. Unlike most developers he's really more concerned with the beauty and the traditional life of the development than with real estate concerns. He also understood that an Orthodox church with the onion domes and these types of features is not out of place in this type of a community, because if there were a 19th century Orthodox church in downtown Charleston, it would be in a somewhat Byzantine style. If you go to San Francisco or New York, where there are 19th Century Orthodox churches, they have an ethnic look to them, but they also fit in with all the other eccentric 19th century architecture that you'll find in an old city.

FMG: So it ended up meeting those standards after all. It's a wonderful place. I've gone all this time and I don't think I've said your name: Andrew Gould. Do you have a website where people can contact you or look at your work?

AG: Yes, you can find it at [andrewgoulddesign.com](http://andrewgoulddesign.com).

FMG: And where can we see- I'm sure you have photographs of this church on your website, and I assume there's also a website for the parish. What is that?

AG: The parish website is [OCACharleston.org](http://OCACharleston.org).

FMG: [OCACharleston.org](http://OCACharleston.org). Thank you so much, Andrew.

AG: Thank you.

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