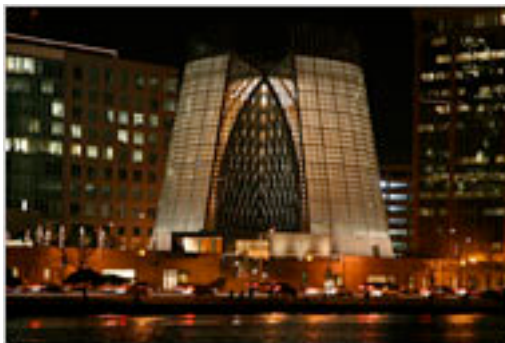


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A Light-Filled Cathedral Radiates Hope

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OAKLAND, Calif. — One of only two cathedrals completed this year in the United States, the Cathedral of Christ the Light is a wonder of religious architecture.



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

The 12-story Cathedral of Christ the Light along Lake Merritt in the downtown section of Oakland, Calif.

Designed by Craig Hartman, a partner in the San Francisco office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the \$190 million cathedral, which seats 1,300, is a 12-story oval structure. Its light-filled nave, laced together with a web of hidden steel bars, is supported by long timbers of Douglas fir and enclosed by wooden louvers and more than 1,000 panes of glass. The combination of wood, glass, concrete and brushed aluminum somehow creates the sensation of serenity and transcendence.

But for residents, city leaders and neighbors, the development is more than just the sanctuary. The 253,000-square-foot complex, on a \$32.7 million, 2.5-acre site in Oakland's downtown, also offers a spacious plaza, below-ground parking for 200 cars, a

conference center that seats 500 people and an aggressive ministry in free health and law clinics.

Oakland's mayor, Ronald V. Dellums, put it succinctly when he addressed an interfaith service at the cathedral on Sept. 26, a day after its dedication. "Thank you for placing this crown on our city," he said. "Thank you for choosing Oakland."

The opening of the Cathedral of Christ the Light, after three years of construction, comes at a moment of economic and cultural reckoning for this uncertain city of 400,000 residents and for more than 500,000 Roman Catholics in the two-county diocese it serves.

The economic downturn threatens to reverse years of steady growth in population, as well as improvement in Oakland's downtown housing, office and retail markets. Housing values in and around the city continue to slump — more than 40 percent over the last two years in many suburbs, almost 20 percent in parts of Oakland. Joblessness is nearly 9 percent in the city and is approaching 8 percent in the surrounding communities.

Another pernicious fact of life is violent crime. Oakland contends with one of the highest rates of homicide in the nation. Last year, 127 people were murdered in Oakland. As of Dec. 1 this year, 118 killings have occurred, including three within 15 blocks of the cathedral.

Some people are leaving. "If you can't protect residents from random violence and crime, then it doesn't matter how walkable a city it is," wrote Susan Glass, the director of media relations at

the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, in an essay in *The San Francisco Chronicle* this month.

Nine years ago, when planning for the new cathedral began, Bishop John S. Cummins and members of the planning committee considered sites in the suburbs. They decided that Oakland was the center of the East Bay region and the hub of the diocese, one of the fastest-growing in the country. The new cathedral, opened the same year as the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Houston, replaces the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales, which was seriously damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and demolished five years later.

The cathedral's provost, the Rev. Paul Minnihan, said at the September interfaith service that the location was central to the cathedral's mission of "outreach, advocacy and concern for social justice." The Cathedral of Christ the Light, he said, "brings light and hope to this city and the streets of all of our communities."

Just as light is a defining metaphor of Oakland diocese's mission, it is also the central design element of the new cathedral.

For more than 1,000 days, people here could watch the ornate choreography of the construction process. The cathedral was built from the top down in order to set the 110-foot laminated timber ribs. From the outside, it looked as if tiny men were swarming through the body cavity of a giant whale.

By day, natural light warms the nave of the completed cathedral. It also shines through 94,000 perforations in an angular aluminum screen above the altar, revealing a 58-foot-high image

of Christ, reproduced from a sculpture above the Royal Portal at the Chartres Cathedral in France.

By night, the cathedral, lighted from the inside, looks like a white crystal, perched on a raised plaza and flanked by much taller office buildings.

The cathedral's site along Lake Merritt, a tidal estuary in the city's downtown that has served since the late 19th century as a wildlife sanctuary and a popular recreation area, is crucial, diocese leaders say. "Cathedrals historically were located at the center of the community," said Mike Brown, a diocese spokesman. "They served as gathering place, market, the center of civic and religious activity."

To some extent, the Cathedral of Christ the Light is already serving that role. The project generated such a powerful response in and around Oakland that the diocese raised \$115 million of the total cost of \$190 million from foundations and private donors, many from Oakland.

Its presence is influencing the surrounding Uptown Lake Merritt neighborhood, which could very well become the new center of Oakland. An active station stop of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, the commuter rail network that serves the San Francisco region, is only a few blocks away. Lake Merritt's nearby neighborhoods are among the nicest in downtown Oakland. A [Whole Foods Market](#) recently opened on Harrison Street, two blocks from the cathedral.

Along Broadway, three blocks from the cathedral in the other

direction, two restored theaters — the Fox and the Paramount — anchor the recovering Uptown neighborhood, which has a new 25,000-square-foot park.

Forest City Enterprises, a Cleveland-based developer, is finishing a 665-unit rental apartment building, part of a 14-acre redevelopment. Signature Properties, based in Pleasanton, Calif., completed a 132-unit condominium project a few blocks away last year. Slow sales have prompted the company to offer some units as rentals.

Forest City also has an exclusive agreement with Oakland to build 250 condominiums in the Uptown district; it plans to start the work when the market picks up. A separate 80-unit affordable rental apartment building is under construction by Resources for Community Development, a Berkeley-based developer.

“How often does somebody build a stunning new cathedral right in the middle of an up-and-coming neighborhood?” asked Jeanne R. Myerson, the president and chief executive of the Swig Company, a San Francisco-based real estate investment and development company that owns the 28-story Kaiser Center office building a block from the new cathedral. “The market is down, but there is still a lot happening in a place becoming a mixed-use transit-oriented district. The cathedral is a once-in-a-lifetime jewel crowning the renaissance of that area.”

Actually more than one lifetime. With the cathedral in an active earthquake zone, the Oakland diocese asked Mr. Hartman to

design a building that could last 300 years. The entire cathedral rests on a nest of casters that enable it to move four feet in any direction.

Mark Sarkisian, the firm's director of structural engineering, asserts that with regular maintenance, the Cathedral of Christ the Light has a design life of at least 1,000 years. "This building was meant for longer life," he said.