

CHAPEL OF ST JAMES THE FISHERMAN. Summer 2020 Newsletter  
Milton McC. "Mac" Gatch

### Chapel colored glass window

I must begin with a confession: Morgan Porteus and I shared a dislike for the window of colored glass panels on the wall behind the pulpit and musicians' area in the Chapel of St James the Fisherman. It seemed to us an intrusion in a carefully designed space: there was little color in the building; light flooded the altar from skylights; windows along the base of the walls admitted limited light to the areas where the congregation sat; the walls were vertical, creosoted boards. I assumed (I can't vouch for Morgan on this detail) that the window had been cut into a blank wall. Morgan had a scheme to deal with this intrusion. The Cape is infested with wild bittersweet vines that engulf untended trees and shrubs. Why not train bittersweet against the outside of the window to obscure its color and light? I believe we may even have tried to start training some volunteer vines near the spot. At least we were going to use indigenous vines!

I was recently asked to respond to an inquiry from Orosz Marton, an art historian in Budapest, about the designer of the window, György Kepes, a Hungarian-born professor of design at MIT who summered on Long Pond in a house designed by Marcel Breuer. I had heard from Chapel old-timer Mary Jones about György Kepes as designer of the window, and that was confirmed by Peter McMahon and Christine Cipriani's book, *Cape Cod Modern* (2014). This information set me on a quest to learn the history of the window. The search revealed new facts and opened new questions.

There is an oral history interview with Olav Hammarstrom, the architect of the chapel, taken a quarter-century after its dedication in 1957 and available online (Archives of American Art: [aaa.si.edu](http://aaa.si.edu)). Hammarstrom relates that James A. Pike, dean of New York's Cathedral Church of St

John the Divine and founder of the chapel, approached Kepes about designing the building. Not an architect, Kepes referred him to Hammarstrom. The architect's detailed description of the building emphasizes that the light is intentionally indirect to give an aura of mystery: the source of light in the skylight (25 small plastic domes masked by a wooden grid) is concealed; the low windows around the perimeter are hidden by the pews and their occupants. He does not mention a window in the east wall. But photographs of the chapel were published in *Architectural Record*, December 1958 (pages 138-9), only eighteen months after the first services were held in the chapel. The expert photographs by Joseph W. Molitor (reproduced in *Cape Cod Modern*, pp, 202-3) clearly show a window in the wall behind the pulpit. It has clear glass panels, six in each row. The *Architectural Record* article also prints a floorplan of St. James, and at the center of the east wall there are markings that indicate the muntins or wooden dividers of the panes. The window, not mentioned by the architect, was in place shortly after the chapel was finished. Either the architect failed to mention an element of his original design, or the window was inserted almost immediately to bring more light into the space.

The Kepes transformation of the window was dedicated in memory of Rosa H. Blakeslee on July 1, 1962, five years after the first service at St James the Fisherman. György Kepes, a painter and designer, was a color theorist, and I recall being told that he tinkered with the arrangement of the colored panes to achieve the effect he desired. The window consists of five rows, each with six rectangular panes. The panes are primarily blue and green glass, each hue in several shades and with varying textures, interspersed with a few pink/beige panels—hardly over-the-counter materials. From a distance, the window seems a formal grid; examined closely, it is akin to mid-century formalist, colorist, abstract paintings with subtle variations of texture and tone.

I now see the Kepes window as a creation of considerable sophistication and forethought. There remain questions, however. Was there a clear-glass window in Hammarstrom's original design,

or was the window cut in the wall very shortly after the chapel was built? Was the clear-glass window, in full sun during Sunday services, thought to admit too much light? What did Olav Hammarstrom think of this, the most significant alteration to his design of St James the Fisherman? It was created, after all, by the person who referred James Pike to Hammarstrom as architect for the project.

Morgan and I stand corrected.