

Anya Ezhevskaya

‘The love that moves the sun and other stars’: *Nebula* windows at Webster Presbyterian Church

...*l'amor che move il sole e l'altrestelle*
Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

Introduction

‘Architecture arose out of a need to visualize the invisible’.¹ While the more widely accepted explanation for the rise of buildings is the need for shelter, this competing theory offers enticing explanations and poses deeper questions about what it means to be human. After all, non-human animals have also sought shelter and created structures to protect themselves from the elements, but only people have relied on designing three-dimensional space to represent concepts and experiences lived but unseen. Over the millennia, ‘communities of people have continually returned to architecture as a medium through which memory has some significant chance of survival’.²

I dedicate this article to a specific element of architectural experience in a specific building: the multifaceted *Nebula* stained glass windows adorning the sanctuary of Webster Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas, USA (FIG. 1). This scheme of windows by American artist Stephen Wilson depicts the first few days of Creation with vibrant cosmic galaxies and nebulae. The stained glass also incorporates images of hands and feet and ears and eyes, alluding to the incarnate corporeality of Christ. These shapes, colours, and images are universal yet intimate. As transparent intermediaries between the external and internal, and as refractors of pure white light, the windows are effective inspiration for contemplation and ‘as a site, and sight, for memory’.³ I will explore how, through its symbolic nature, the stained glass scheme expands into other spiritual and secular spheres of life to ‘connect faith, religion, tradition, and art’.⁴ I’ll also consider how the *Nebula* windows serve as surprisingly effective tools of witness, engagement, and play. Creation and creativity, symbology spanning faith traditions and Webster Presbyterian Church’s idiosyncrasies, architectural elements representing spiritual realities and stewarding memory: who could imagine that coloured glass could be so generative? But it is, and so we begin our journey with a little white church on NASA Road 1.

A brief history of Webster Presbyterian Church

Today Webster Presbyterians look like James Kinzler: a retired mechanical engineer whose father, Jack, moved the young family to Houston to work in the newly minted Johnson Space Center sixty years ago. Jack Kinzler would nurture a lifelong relationship with WPC while building a proud career at NASA, at one point designing the iconic American flag placed on the Moon. His children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren continue their life at WPC today.

But the church didn’t always look this way. It was originally founded in 1896 by Midwestern farmers and later by the local Japanese rice settlement. Members of the settlement, immortalised in Webster street names such as the nearby Kobayashi Road, were committed to their community and to education – values still shared by WPC congregants. The first senior pastor was brought onboard in the 1950s and the congregation experienced significant growth in the 1960s and ’70s thanks to NASA’s

new flight control centre which attracted the brightest minds from across the country. Presbyterian astronauts, engineers and their families began attending WPC, which quickly became known as the ‘Church of the Astronauts’.

As NASA’s space program expanded, so did its influence on the Webster family of faith: the Presbyterian value of education was buttressed by a positive view of the interaction between science and religion, while an early pioneering of women in church leadership expanded towards a commitment to other issues of social justice. One small, white building grew into two, then three; one sanctuary was replaced by another, then a third and fourth, until a final fifth iteration was commissioned and built in 2004. By this point the congregation had changed significantly, more closely resembling the way it looks today and more in alignment with the vision statement that highlights inclusivity, a dedication to the arts and sciences, and a respect for social issues.

The church campus now consists of several buildings, with the flagship Sanctuary building as the centrepiece. The Sanctuary houses the *Nebula* windows, designed and made by stained glass artist Stephen Wilson who graduated from a unique Masters of Fine Arts program in stained glass at Louisiana State University (LSU). The windows were commissioned by the church congregation through the New Sanctuary Team, chartered to oversee construction of the building. Lifelong WPC member Kathy Braeuer was part of this team and recalls that Wilson had previously designed and made a window for the earlier sanctuary in the 1990s. When he was approached about the new work, he was both delighted and perplexed: was he ready to take on such a large project involving six circular windows (three on each side of the Sanctuary), each eight feet in diameter, plus a 25-foot altar window and an eight-foot diameter back window? However, it wasn’t the physical scale that concerned – and enticed – him most, but the faith the congregation placed in him to design an artistic, liturgical work that would be universally appealing and personally meaningful for this unique group of believers.

FIG. 1:
View of
sanctuary, Webster
Presbyterian
Church, Houston,
Texas, USA,
showing partial
scheme of stained
glass by Stephen
Wilson (2003).
Photograph by
Stephen Wilson,
used by
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Stained glass concepts

A lifelong artist who ‘fell in love’ with the medium of glass in an elective class as an LSU senior, Wilson recollects that initial meetings with the New Sanctuary Team were difficult. Each of its seven members had their own ideas of what the windows should depict, including a detailed vision of ‘winsome scenes with Jesus and the children’. Wilson remembers exclaiming, ‘I think you got the wrong guy, if that’s what you want!’. Following in the steps of his teacher Paul Dufour, who had studied under the acclaimed colourist Josef Albers at Yale, Wilson held tight to the mantra that Dufour preached and that LSU MFA graduates were known for: when it comes to painting and stained glass, ‘keep the paint on the canvas and let the glass speak for itself’. In Wilson’s words, ‘the

hallmark of any LSU graduate in stained glass is their emphasis on color more than the narrative’.

The spirited conversation about subject matter during the initial meeting continued until one of the team, also a board member of the Menil Collection in Houston, exclaimed in exasperation, ‘Oh good grief. There are seven windows, just do the seven deadly sins!’. That ended the discussion.

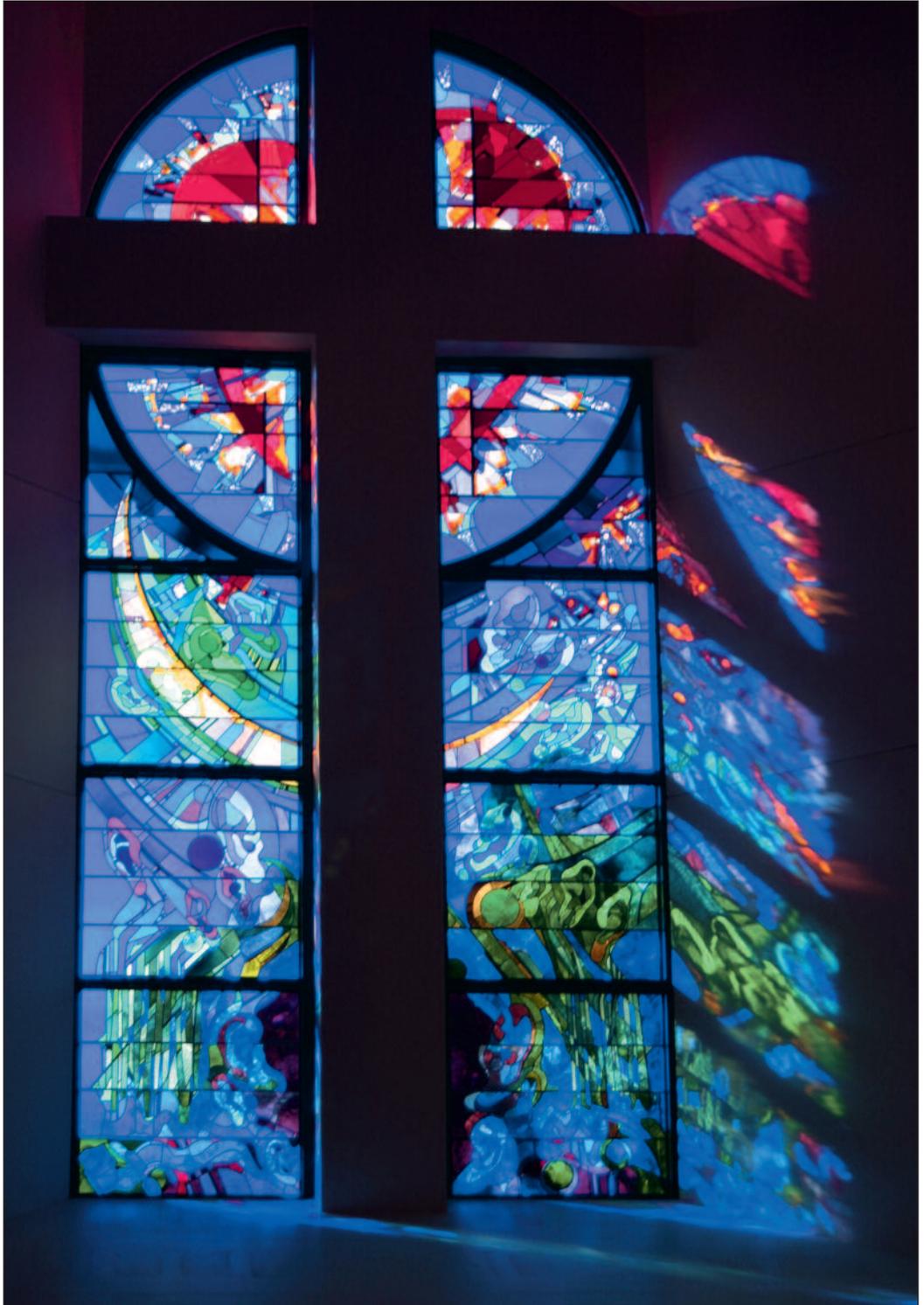
When Wilson returned home that evening, his librarian wife Claire had been looking at images from the Hubble telescope, including one on the front page of their newspaper. She suggested ‘Why don’t you do nebulae in stained glass?’ and the idea struck a chord. After studying the many photographs Claire brought home the following day Wilson began exploring ways to integrate cosmic images and ecclesiastical themes: ‘We had a direction to go in: the matrix of the windows... but how do they relate to the gospel and center on the mission of the church?’. That was left for the stained glass artist to discern. A few days later he pitched the Nebula idea to WPC pastor Woody Berry and the Committee and received a resolute ‘GO!... That’s when I had the total freedom... it was wonderful’.

Brauer speaks of Wilson’s spiritual creative process, which lasted for the better part of the year as he developed the draft designs. Having a good understanding of the ‘flavour’ of the congregation, he was given liberty to create as he felt moved. He did sometimes call for guidance and direction, but in the end the artist and God did the hard work of ‘seeing goodness into [their] creation’.⁵ ‘How do you direct creativity?’, Brauer asks rhetorically, ‘You don’t!’. When completed, the scheme that Wilson presented was unlike anything the congregants had seen. They were stunned, impressed, and unanimously voted to approve the design. Within five weeks they raised the large sum of money required for the project – tangible confirmation of how closely they resonated with both the visual programme and the message of the new *Nebula* windows.⁶

At first glance, the almost exclusively circular windows appear abstract: with smooth curved lines, spherical movement, and a bright interplay of glass in teals, oranges, and maroons against an azure background (FIG. 2). Upon closer examination, images of hands and feet in overlapping positions begin to emerge from amorphous ‘stardust’ clouds. In one window we see two faces and several eyes, in another a right

FIG. 2 (above):
Stephen Wilson,
Feet Nebula
window (2003),
right side
of Webster
Presbyterian
Church.
Photograph by
Anya Ezhevskaya.

FIG. 3 (opposite):
Stephen Wilson,
Heart Nebula
Altar window
(2003). Photograph
by Stephen
Wilson, used
by permission.



and left hand extend in a pouring position, pierced with red glass and white bubbles: equal parts Calvary and gurgling brook of living water.

The *Heart Nebula* altar window rising above the chancel includes a heavy wooden cross as part of its giant frame (FIG. 3). On sunny days, light pours through its upper portion which, with a nod to Cubism, depicts a blazing heart-shaped nebula foregrounded by deep ultramarine. The lower part shows a thin, brilliantly gold crescent Moon, something that may be interpreted as a pool with green reeds and twenty-seven ears, all aiming upward. In fact, it seems that all lines, colours, shapes and images, both abstract and more decipherable, are reaching in a frozen tension of yearning for the blazing heart. In harmony across the nave, and linked by colour, the circular back window (FIG. 4) also depicts a blazing heart but with the more distinct features of the Celtic-turned-Presbyterian cross.

Creator, creativity, creation

True to his LSU program, Wilson emphasises colour in his work and treats faces, bodies, hands and feet 'in a more primitive way... The most beautiful stained glass era in antiquity was the Gothic era [and] Byzantine expression. The figures and narrative in those windows were secondary to the fact that the windows became tapestries of light.' Wilson emulates this aesthetic by using vibrant potmetal glass to enrich the worship experience. In other works, he embraces abstract forms to express Faith, Hope, Love, and other mainstays of the Christian faith. The impact of his rich palette's modulation of light is mediated by Wilson's dynamic leading and surface etching, which define the space. In his own words:

One of the things that people say is that my most powerful idiom is the movement: I use the leadline and have the lines parallel each other but moving in and out and swirling. I like to think of them as currents to give the window action. The imagery is in there, almost like an overlay. Stained glass is a transparent medium, so I like to make the images in stained glass transparent, so that they're more like filters making statements through the windows.⁷



FIG. 5:
'Humanity-ship',
exterior view
of Webster
Presbyterian
Church in 2003.
Photograph by Bay
Area Architects.



For the raw materials of his medium, Wilson's studio is committed to using the highest quality of antique glass: mouth-blown and hand-rolled, purchased predominantly from Germany, Poland, and to a lesser extent from France and from the Blenko Glass Company in the little town of Milton, West Virginia. Wilson bemoans that 'the palette is shrinking', and in recent years has bought out the inventory of several closing studios. He points out that demand for the highest quality of glass 'isn't there anymore. Hobbyists do not have the same stringent demands and factories cannot fund the creation of a large variety of colours'.

Architecture as metaphor

Even from a distance the new Sanctuary building looks unusual because of the windows. Although Rose windows may often accent the entrance and altar of a church or cathedral, having so many circular windows is rare. They remind one of portholes – openings in the port and starboard sides of submarines, oceanic liners, and spaceships. The history of WPC suggests this was by design. To those who think about the church as the Body of Christ, standing in solidarity in the face of divisive forces of 'the world', the Sanctuary can seem like a sort of Christian rocket, securely protecting those within from the harsh vacuum of space. The idea of a modern Noah's ark also comes to mind. But as attendees gaze at the images in, and metaphorically *through*, the stained glass portholes – galaxies, creation, human hands and feet – their interpretation may be expanded. This is not an exclusive Christ-ship; it is a humanity-ship (FIG. 5). Inclusivity is echoed in the WPC vision statement, welcoming 'ALL alongside us to create a more loving, affirming, just and sustainable world'. Expanding further, one might even imagine WPC as a small representation of 'spaceship Earth'.⁸

FIG. 4:
Stephen Wilson,
Heart Nebula back
window (2003).
Photograph by
Stephen Wilson,
used by
permission.



Sanctuary: memory and time

Architecture can be an effective storage place for group memory – the invisible knowledge of things past. Humans have used buildings in this way for millennia, and at WPC the Sanctuary serves as a place that holds memories of a formative era in space exploration and local church history. ‘Memory imprinting’ is effectively enacted by the stained glass windows, because through ‘the participation of observers within, past times and spaces are reactivated in the present’.⁹ Wilson recalls the example of a former NASA engineer on the Hubble repair team at the Johnson Space Center (JSC) who had resigned to raise a family: ‘looking at these windows she felt she was still at work, still experiencing the nebula images’. Once the Sanctuary begins filling with people, the windows glowing with distant galaxies recall to congregants their years at the JSC and memories are revived.

In addition to images created out of juxtaposed pieces of glass, the altar window includes a unique artefact: two pieces of the Allende meteorite that fell in Mexico in February 1969 near the Pueblito de Allende in the state of Chihuahua. According to the WPC website ‘Pieces of the meteorite were used to test the Lunar Receiving Laboratory procedures in preparation for handling the rocks brought back by the Apollo 11 crew’, and a small piece was donated by church member Judy Alton (who headed the Laboratory), to be incorporated into the window, ‘its white fragments [containing] the oldest material formed in our solar system and tiny diamonds older than our solar nebula created in a supernova’.¹⁰ The meteorite was given to the stained glass artist for installation, but in a moment of forgetfulness he put it in his pocket and now there are two pieces! If you know where to look, and WPC members

FIG. 6:
Stephen Wilson,
Face Nebula
(2003), left side
of Webster
Presbyterian
Church.
Photograph by
Anya Ezhevskaya.



do, you can make out two darkened spots on a sea of colour in the upper right quadrant of the window (SEE FIG. 3). As people gaze and recall both stories, they become ‘active performer[s] of memory’¹¹ and, as history is made visible, ‘a collective sharing of memory’¹² is enacted.

The concept of reactivating memory to serve the current needs of living people is alive at WPC. The congregation annually re-enacts the Eucharistic communion meal that was shared between its members on the ground and church elder Buzz Aldrin on the Moon on 20 July 1969. This event, which came to be called Lunar Communion, is still celebrated on the Sunday closest to that date. The crescent Moon beaming down onto the communion table from the stained glass of the altar window offers a visual aid through which members can experience Communion directly and extra-vididly, leaning into a type of remembering that ‘focuses more on engagement’ than mere observation.

‘Memorials can mark out sacred time as much as sacred space’.¹³ As a viewer beholds the windows furthest from the altar, she may imagine that she’s looking at the second day of Creation: ‘Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water’. So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky” (Genesis 1:6-8). As forms take shape in the centre of these windows, focus tightens and out of washes of non-representational colour distinctly identifiable images emerge (FIG. 6). It’s as if time starts from the Big Bang and accelerates toward the centre; as though all of creation, in space *and* time, awaits and zeroes in on the love of God represented by the heart nebula in the altar window. Cosmic time in human-sized space: memories of vast evolutionary processes and memories of recent decades can coexist in this juncture.

FIG. 7:
Stephen Wilson,
Hands Nebula
(2003), right side
of Webster
Presbyterian
Church.
Photograph by
Anya Ezhevskaya.

A helpful concept for understanding this phenomenon is the *chronotope*. Developed by Michael Bakhtin and coined from the Latin *chronos* and *topos*, this term ‘describes the time/space nexus in which life exists and creativity is possible’.¹⁴ There is never a repeatable combination of space and time. As a result, each lived experience (and each object, each work of art, each stained glass window) is perceived differently depending on its unique chronotope. Thus, as generations at WPC change, their experiences of a stationary set of windows are renewed because of the passage of time. WPC associate pastor Helen DeLeon sees in the windows a temporal connection between the past and the future, ‘For me, [they] connect us to our origins and our aspirations as the people of God’.¹⁵

Content

The WPC website explains that the windows are based on Matthew 13:15, ‘Look with your eyes; listen with your ears; understand with your heart’. While Braeuer acknowledges the same bodily elements, she believes the eyes and hands, especially those in red in the right pane closest to the altar, are God’s. She also sees the grass on the altar window as a symbol of ‘each part of us growing into all of us’.¹⁶ Pastor Helen also speaks of the reeds, saying that they are a nod to the ‘agrarian history of WPC’. She recognises the allusions to NASA and space exploration and suggests that the body parts ‘come together in the rectangular windows around the cross and culminate in the “heart of God”’.¹⁷

Wilson has his own interpretation of his scheme, with its pairs of feet windows, hand windows, and face windows: ‘It was kind of fun doing the hands and feet and faces because they’re disembodied from the rest of the body. It’s a play on the funkiness of some of the old stained glass windows where they did look disjointed [before] modern painting styles [emerged] where everything looked so realistic, more like a painting than a stained glass window’ (FIG. 7). The feet represent Christians who carry the gospel – with a nod to the Bible passage ‘how lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news’ (Isaiah 52:7). The hands represent care, healing, touch. The face reminds Wilson of his mother’s words that ‘as a Christian your face should reflect the glory of God’. Finally, the large *Heart Nebula* altar window is also full of allusions: the ears are there as ‘a harkening to the congregation: open your ears! Open your spiritual ears! (SEE FIG. 3)’. The reeds at the bottom of the window are a statement about time: ‘The psalmist said, ‘Man is like the grass of the field, sprouts today and is burned up tomorrow. We are but a breath... . make the most of your life while you got it!’ The crescent moon had to be present to allude to Buzz Aldrin’s historic journey to the Moon and his Lunar Communion. Wilson states that the paired rose windows with faces and hands and feet were influenced in part by a quote of author Frederick Buechner, who said that human bodies comprised ‘the stuff of stars’.¹⁸

Not only is Wilson a creative and committed stained glass artist, but, moving into the intangible

FIG. 8:
Stephen Wilson,
detail of *Feet*
Nebula (2003),
left side
of Webster
Presbyterian
Church.
Photograph by
Anya Ezhevskaya.



world, we learn from Braeuer that ‘Stephen is a very spiritual man’, who knew the WPC story and had ‘an understanding that everything works together for the glory of God and that we are all part of each other’.¹⁹ Philosopher of religion Gerard van der Leeuw eloquently describes such a symbiosis:

The artist creates figures, but if he really succeeds, if his work is more than a ‘work’, if it becomes a living creation, then it is not the ‘creative genius’ which accomplishes this miracle, but the creator himself. And the artist is not the proud hero... but the humble servant, who with bated breath and trembling excitement recognizes in the work of his hands the image of God.²⁰

Wilson was deeply moved by the experience of designing and making the windows, and would probably agree with David A. Covington, who echoes van der Leeuw’s sentiment that ‘we do not master beauty or aesthetics; the beautiful one masters us’.²¹ Covington also sets forth a definition of aesthetics that is useful when considering the creation-worship process. Aesthetics is ‘a conversation between the maker’s intention, the character and properties of the work, the impression made on the receiver’s senses, and his affectional response’.²² Who is the maker in our case? He, who created the universe, or he, who created the windows that depict creation? In the same vein, the ‘characters and properties’ of the work can be understood as those pertaining to all of creation as well as those pertaining to the artistic work itself. The dual manner in which the definition of aesthetics can be applied points to the complex, intimate relationship between God and us as ‘sub-creators’. He created the world and we are able to dream up smaller worlds within it, reflecting his actions and his spirit of playful creativity.

If we expand the meaning of the term ‘creator’ to encompass the entire congregation who commissioned Wilson to make the windows, another layer of interaction enters the conversation. Their unified response can be explained by the congregants’ sentiment that the windows represented what was in their hearts: they couldn’t have created better windows even if they were all stained glass professionals. This unity of spirit is reminiscent of art historian Kenneth Clark’s telling of the Chartres story. Despite many setbacks, the builders, labourers, artisans, and sponsors all bought into the vision of the glorious gothic cathedral; ‘all hearts were united and each man forgave his enemies’.²³ Many centuries later that initial spirit of togetherness lingers. Clark notes that ‘faith has given the interior of Chartres a unity and a spirit of devotion that exceeds even the other great churches of France’.²⁴ The same can be said of the more modest Sanctuary of Webster Presbyterian Church.

The viewers: witness and play

William Dyrness studies in detail how aesthetics – the sensual, evaluative response that we feel towards objects or experiences – serves as a bridge between the Judeo-Christian God and the spiritual-but-not-religious population. He asserts, for example, that what one feels when beholding works of art is similar to what one feels during worship; ‘Aesthetics draws us into relationships that are affective, which means that this movement is allied with love’.²⁵ When guests enter the Sanctuary and glance at the windows, they cannot easily look away. The windows pack an aesthetic punch and demand a response; they make you *feel* things, react, engage. Dyrness argues that this is the path toward love, the ultimate feeling. God is love, the Scriptures say. Love is also God, one might deduce.

The *Nebula* windows attract attention because they evolve as you look at them. First there is chaos, then a foot (FIG. 8). First there is a hand, then two hands, then several holding something out. Are there really ears on the altar window? Is there a piece of *meteorite* above the Communion table? The windows invite believers and nonbelievers alike to a game of ‘I Spy’. But this is serious play: the kind with long-



lasting consequences; the kind that welcomes and engages, that draws one toward God. Roberto Goizueta, quoted by Dyrness, speaks of the seriousness of play in no uncertain terms: ‘Play, recreation, and celebration are the most authentic forms of life precisely because, when we are playing, recreating, or celebrating, we are immersed in, or ‘fused’ with, the action itself, and those other persons with whom we are participating. Thus, we are involved in and enjoying the living itself.’²⁶

Visitors to the church find themselves touched, welcomed, engaged in play, and loved all before a single person reaches out a hand with a friendly ‘Howdy!’. Braeuer thinks the *Nebula* windows are ‘probably easier for non-Christians to access. Any person must wonder, must seek...’.²⁷ And the windows invite them into dialogue. They offer affirming, unobtrusive witness that meets individuals where they are and spends some time with them on their journey. For believers, the windows can shed light (pun intended) on questions about God’s intentions – the congregation is invited to engage, to come up close and interact.²⁸ Since welcoming the windows two decades ago, the congregation continues to say ‘yes’ and experience ever-new ways of worshipping. Braeuer likes to sit contemplatively and ‘see the pictures evolve – they come through to you, and it takes a while for them to sink in’ (SEE FIG. 7). Others enjoy the changing play of light through the seasons and the ‘sensuous-emotional impact’²⁹ of the blended aural and visual experience generated during Sunday service. Dyrness writes, ‘One comes to church to feel the touch of God – that is what church is for’.³⁰ Through an unimposing invitation to engagement and play, the *Nebula* windows help Webster Presbyterian serve that purpose.

In terms of emotional engagement, an unlikely comparison can be drawn between the *Nebula* scheme and Argentinean artist Gyula Kosice’s installation *La ciudad hidroespacial* (The Hydrospatial City), in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (FIG. 9). The installation is a collection of futuristic space-cities which find humans in numinous, spherical rooms suspended in the air. All around, deep-space blues bring forth the glowing hot-white stars while planetary rings

FIG. 9:
Detail of sculpture
maquette 1, Gyula
Kosice, *La ciudad
hidroespacial* (The
Hydrospatial City)
installation (1946-
1972), Museum
of Fine Arts,
Houston.
Photograph (2020)
by Anya
Ezhevskaya.

and convex shapes allude to space travel. Curiously, if one squints just so, the church windows and this installation seem to be made of the same material, literally and figuratively. Bright colours and an invitation to engage in the *Hydrospatial City* is expressed by the Thumbelina-sized human figurines shown living on the various planes of the suspended municipal globes (FIG. 10). One can sense the artist's desire to speak to something universal and uplifting. The accompanying museum label explains that Kosice 'envisioned a new form of existence where daily life, poetry, play, and art would be indistinguishable... [his *Ciudad* shows] playful, emotional, and psychological dimensions of human existence.'³¹ As an additional vignette to this artist's work, rumour has it that he approached NASA with his designs for such cities, and although the proposal was attractive and almost feasible, NASA turned it down for lack of practicality and high production costs.³²

The love that moves the sun

In the *Inferno* section of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante refers to art as the 'grandchild of God'.³³ I have attempted to demonstrate this intricate, intimate relationship through analysis of the WPC *Nebula* windows.

Many questions remain for further contemplation. For instance, how do church attendees experience the sublime as they are enveloped in the intermingling light pouring through the windows? What are the important differences between gazing, beholding, glancing, and looking when the action is directed toward the windows, especially in our culture of hyper-fast visual input? How does the purely emotional response to perceiving the aesthetically pleasing in the windows enable more poignant worship? But as Dante wrote in the closing lines of *Paradise*, *ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne* ('my own wings were far too weak for that'). I leave the reader to continue that exploration on their own. May their journey, too, be moved *si come rotach'igualmente è mossa, l'amor che move il sole e l'altrestelle* (like a wheel revolving uniformly – by the Love that moves the sun and other stars).³⁴

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FIG. 10:
Detail of sculpture
maquette 2, Gyula
Kosice, *La ciudad
hidroespacial* (*The
Hydrospatial City*)
installation (1946-
1972), Museum of
Fine Arts,
Houston.
Photograph (2020)
by Anya
Ezhevskaya.

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Notes on Contributors

BARRIE ARMSTRONG and **WENDY ARMSTRONG** Until 1996, Barrie was Chief Environmental Health Officer of the Borough of Macclesfield and Wendy, an honours graduate in Sociology, enjoyed a varied career including twenty years in community development for the Social Services Department of Cheshire County Council. They took early retirement to develop their shared passion for the Arts and Crafts Movement and produced their ground-breaking book, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in the North West of England: A Handbook* in 2005. They went on to seek out the legacy of the movement in the North East of England and in Yorkshire, resulting in the publication of two further volumes in 2013. They now spend time researching less well-known artists, designers and craftsmen in the North of England.

DR TIMOTHY BRITAIN-CATLIN runs the new architecture apprenticeship course at the University of Cambridge. In 2020 he published *The Edwardians and their Houses: the New Life of Old England* (Lund Humphries).

DR JAMES BUGSLAG studied at the University of East Anglia. He is now Professor Emeritus in the School of Art at the University of Manitoba and President of the Canadian Committee of the CVMA. His current research is divided between Corpus work, Chartres Cathedral, and the art and architecture of pilgrimage. He is co-author of the first Canadian Corpus Vitrearum volume, *The Stained Glass of the Hosmer Collection*, McGill University.

JILL (KERR) CHANNER, MA, FSA, FRSA, IHBC is an Independent Historic Building and Architectural Glass Consultant with over forty years professional experience in both the public and voluntary sectors dealing with historic buildings and stained glass.

JACK CLARE BA (HONS), PG Dip is a stained glass conservator and Director of Holy Well Glass. He works day-to-day in the preservation of some of the nation's most significant stained glass, and manages a large team who specialise in both conservation of historic fabric, and new design work. He is a Fellow of the SPAB and a Pathway member of the Institute of Conservation.

PETER CORMACK MBE, FSA, HON FMGP is a Vice-President of the BSMGP, an Honorary Director of the Charles J. Connick Foundation (Boston, MA), Honorary Curator of Kelmscott Manor (William Morris's Oxfordshire home) and an adviser to Southwark and St Albans DACs. He has written extensively on 19th- and 20th-century stained glass and his monograph *Arts & Crafts Stained Glass* was published in 2015 by Yale University Press. He is currently working on a book about Charles Connick, the foremost American stained glass artist of the twentieth century.

PATRICK COSTELOE BA, CAMGP gained a degree in Art History and Literature at Middlesex University in 1979 before moving to Bristol where he trained and worked at Joseph Bell & Son Stained Glass until it closed in 1996. He then opened a workshop with his partner Rosalind Grimshaw. He is based in Dorset where he has been living and working since 2016.

ALEXANDRA EPPS is an Accredited Lecturer for The Arts Society and Guide and Lecturer for Tate Modern, Tate Britain and the Guildhall Art Gallery. She is also an official Guide to the City of London offering walks and talks based on many aspects of the arts, including stained glass. Her background is in design having practiced as a graphic designer running her own design consultancy for many years.

DONATO ESPOSITO is an academic and curator who specialises in 18th- and 19th-century art, collecting and taste. From 1999 to 2004 he worked as Curator in the Department of Prints and Drawings, British Museum and was in 2012-13 an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. His monograph *Frederick Walker and the Idyllists* was published in 2017.

ANYA EZHEVSKAYA is a PhD candidate in World Arts at Dallas International University (USA). Her research interests include creativity and artificial intelligence, Russian bardic song, arts and trauma healing, and liturgical stained glass. She is also a full-time translator working for NASA's International Space Station program at the Johnson Space Center. In her free time she enjoys camping with her children, painting and writing, exploring the world with her husband, and climbing walls.

BRIAN GREEN is a liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters of Glass. He is the current organiser of the Stevens Competition.

DR MARIE GROLL is a senior manager at the York Glaziers Trust and project director for international arts consultancy Büro Rauch. She is Vice Chair of the ICON Stained Glass Group, and an associate member of the British Corpus Vitrearum. Since 2017 she has been involved with the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and is the administrator and coordinator for their conservation grants and work placement and CPD awards.

MARTIN HARRISON FSA, HON FMGP is an author, curator and art historian. He has written widely on stained glass and 20th-century art and is author of *Victorian Stained Glass* (1980) and *The Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings of Francis Bacon* (2016). He is Editor-in-Chief of the Estate of Francis Bacon Publishing and is currently researching the medieval stained glass of East Anglia.

ROBIN JACKSON PHD FSA SCOT is a retired academic who has developed a particular interest in the life and work of the artist Hermann Gross. He has written extensively about the Camphill Movement: *Holistic Special Education: Camphill Principles and Practice* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2006); *Discovering Camphill, New Perspectives, Research and Developments* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2011).

DR MICHAEL KERNEY FSA, HON FMGP is a retired academic with a particular interest in stained glass, and in the architecture and decorative arts of the nineteenth century.

OKSANA KONDRATYEVA is an artist, scholar and lecturer. Her artworks and papers have been exhibited and presented internationally.

GEORGINA MALTBY has an MA from Trinity College Dublin where the discovery of Harry Clarke deepened her interest in stained glass. Author with Andrew Loutit of *Theodora Salusbury 1875-1956 Stained Glass Artist* (2018), she is a lifelong resident of Leicestershire. Drawn to fine art as a child, she studied and worked with modern languages and now finds much interest in history.

JUDITH SCHAECHTER FMGP lives, works and teaches in Philadelphia. Her stained glass is collected internationally and is represented in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, the V&A, London and the Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, among others. Her work was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and she is the recipient of numerous awards including the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005. She was inducted to the College of Fellows of the American Craft Council In 2013, and in 2019 was

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