

**'THORNCROWN' CHAPEL IN ARKANSAS:  
NATURE-WORSHIP AND CHRISTIANITY -  
UNEASY BED-FELLOWS**

Elizabeth Fletcher

'Thorncrown' Chapel, in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, USA, was designed and built by the internationally acclaimed American architect, E Fay Jones. Fay Jones had been commissioned by a well-to-do native of Arkansas, James Reed, to build an interdenominational chapel on eight acres of land in the hills of the Ozark Mountains.

He started his commission with a number of guiding principles:

- that architecture ought to distil and express people's feelings, in this case religious feelings, in the way that poetry distils language;
- that it *was* possible to build a chapel which would be suitable for people of all denominations (and I use that word in its widest sense) to meditate and worship in; and
- that the untouched beauty of the site, a pristine woodland on the side of a mountain, enclosed by trees and sky, ought to be tampered with as little as possible.

The chapel he designed is one of the most admired religious buildings in the United States of America. It first came to my attention when Tone Wheeler, of the School of Architecture at Sydney University, showed me pictures of it, in the book about Fay Jones published by The American Institute of Architects Press. I had decided to photograph significant religious buildings along the east coast of the United States, as part of an investigation I was doing into the connection between American history and culture on the one hand, and religious architecture on the other. I had been looking for examples of outstanding modern church buildings; Tone felt it essential that I see and photograph Thorncrown.

So I did my homework on Fay Jones, travelled to Arkansas (I am, by the way, one of the few Australians ever seen in Arkansas, it seems), and duly went to Thorncrown. I was rewarded by a church building of outstanding beauty and spiritual harmony. The calm and tranquillity of the building and its site are, literally, physically arresting: the people I saw there stood, looked and were lost in thought - as I was for two hours, until I was virtually dragged away from the building by my companions.

My first reaction was admiration for what Walt Whitman would have called the 'primal sanity' of the building: the combination of beauty and order, the feeling that things were as they ought to be. This building tapped into Nature, human intuition and imagination, on the one hand, and married it with the intelligence, logic and creativity of architecture. The building belonged to the site, harmonised with it, almost as if site and building were interchangeable. I felt the power of the building, to move me as well as shelter me.

But as time went on, I began to analyse what Fay Jones had done in a more critical way - and I use the word 'critical' here in its positive sense. For some time, I have been interested in the way that church architecture expresses the theology of the society from which it springs. And by this, I do not refer to *function* in architecture: i.e., this building will be used to perform these particular acts of worship, by these particular people, and so the floor-plan must be *thus*, and the fittings must include *this* and be placed in such a way as to enhance the act of worship. Rather I refer to the *form* of the building, its overall structure, its volume and space, perhaps its building methods and the attitudes which shape them, and the mood that the building, taken as a whole, creates.

So, for example, in my travels I had looked at the monolithic blocks of stone used in the construction of 19th century neo-Gothic church architecture, and wondered how deliberate had been the purpose of the builders, to create a building which in its very structure suggested the power and might of established religion, so strong a part of 19th century culture. Had the intention been to awe the masses, to impress them with the authority of the Church, by building a structure which imposed itself on the landscape with enormous blocks of granite? Here I am thinking particularly of St Patrick's Cathedral in New York, but of course the same can be said for neo-Gothic churches, particularly cathedrals, world-wide.

I looked at Thorncrowne with fresh eyes, and began to ask some questions about it -

- what parts of its architecture were conscious expressions of theology?
- and what were the other, perhaps unconscious, concepts expressed in its design?
- in other words, how could the building be read (its physical aspects) and understood (its metaphysical quality)?

The first thing that struck me at Thorncrowne was the path which led to the entrance. I knew that every inch of this apparently informal path had been carefully designed and placed by Fay Jones to create a particular

impression. The pathway, and the trees on either side of it, shield Thorncrown from the immediate view of the visitor. Gradually, through the trees, the building becomes visible, as a ship approaching through mist becomes visible. This had been a deliberate ploy by Fay Jones, to suggest that life was a journey along a pathway, with the end point obscured from sight, but gradually coming into view with a realisation and awakening on our part.

Another thing that struck me was the calm and beauty of the setting, its invitation to silent thought, to meditation. In contrast, the early American meeting houses and churches I had photographed in New England and Virginia had a strong communal feeling, and had doubled, when they were built, as communal meeting houses. There was a sense in them of the individual being subsumed into the community, and the community functioning as an organic unit.

This was not the case at Thorncrown. Here, one had a strong sense of the individual, of being able to sit quietly and think through one's experience of life. There was not the sense of worshipping *with* a community. So it seemed to me that Thorncrown had a different emphasis, favouring a modern, individual-centred type of prayer. I am not, by the way, saying that 16th and 17th century worship did not involve silent, inward-looking prayer, which of course it did, but that the modern world places a greater emphasis on the individual than did these earlier centuries, and that this is reflected in Thorncrown.

The most dramatic feature of Thorncrown is its roof structure. This is what makes it one of the most famous buildings in modern church architecture. It has two distinctive features of the building, trademarks of Fay Jones. They are

- the internal buttressing system, and
- the use of moderately sized pieces of wood, most evident here but in fact used throughout the building.

At Thorncrown, the tension systems which support the roof load are internal. This contrasts with the traditional Gothic system of buttressing, where the buttresses are external. Gothic architecture shared the same problem that faced Fay Jones: high narrow walls supporting the dead load of the roof, resulting in walls which would belly out and de-construct themselves, so to speak, if they were not buttressed.

In Thorncrown, although the imagery is decidedly Gothic (high ceiling, Gothic pitch to roof, glassed walls, etc) the structural system is not. Fay Jones has deliberately sacrificed the great open void below the roof in

order to fill it with a criss-cross of tension members similar to the multi layered timber structures of Buddhist temples in China, Korea and Japan. The posts that hold up the roof are not strong enough by themselves to withstand an external force such as wind. The delicate internal web of beams serves to transfer wind load from the sides of the building to stronger areas, and thus the pressure is dissipated.

The result is an internal forest of criss-crossing beams. They are dramatically beautiful in themselves, but, as well, they reinforce the proximity of the forest of trees outside the window, and so carry Nature inside. As well, because they are above the person standing in the chapel, they suggest the height and grandeur of forest trees, as if we are standing in a forest looking upwards at a great stand of trees.

I mentioned the third principle guiding Fay Jones when he was designing the chapel: that the untouched beauty of the site ought to be tampered with as little as possible. In this case, it was no vague ideal articulated to impress a client. Fay Jones went to great lengths to disturb the surrounding flora as little as possible. His most famous stipulation was that no materials be used on the building site which could not be carried by two men. This meant that only a small pathway needed to be cut into the trees during the building of the chapel.

It also meant that all building materials had to be limited in physical size and weight. So the wooden beams used are almost all 2 x 4 pine beams, with some 2 x 6's and 2 x 12's. This was of course a limiting factor on the way the building could be constructed, but it contributed to the overall effect of the interior of the building, which has a human scale which is lost in many large modern buildings, and indeed in most neo-Gothic architecture.

I then began to think about the *decoration of the interior* of Thorncrowne. As I have said, Fay Jones had initially been commissioned to design a building which would be interdenominational, open to people of any religious persuasion, or of none. Its interior had been designed to have no symbol or decoration which could link it with any of the major world religions.

But notice the light fittings, which incidentally show the two great influences on Fay Jones:

- Frank Lloyd Wright, for whom he worked as a young man; I would draw your attention to the many similarities between Thorncrowne and the Wayfarers' Chapel at Long Beach in California, designed by Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright, and

- Japanese architecture, which had also been a strong influence on Frank Lloyd Wright.

You will see that the design of the light fittings includes a Christian cross. It seems that the original concept of an interdenominational chapel was modified, as time went on. Arkansas is a strongly Christian area, traditional and conservative, not ready to accept a religious worldview which is not dominated by Christianity. You will see too that Christian Bibles are now placed prominently alongside each pew. To paraphrase St Augustine, innovation, yes, but not yet.

The reality is, of course, that any attempt to limit the chapel to a single denomination, be it Christian or otherwise, was bound to fail. The chapel is dominated by its surroundings. Nature not only encloses the building, but seems to enter and permeate its interior. The building gives the impression of being situated in the earth, of the earth, with the rock jutting up a metre on each side.

The glass coming out of the rock, the great stone slabs of the floor - all these are linking the worshipper with Nature. The leaves come up to the edge of the windows, as if the building is planted in the earth, growing up out of the ground itself like a living organism. The trees surround and enclose the building. Standing inside the chapel, one has the impression of being held in the palm of Nature's hand.

Thorncrown has no traditional altar. Instead, where the altar would normally be, we have an unimpeded view of Nature, framed by the structure so as to become the focal point of the building. This is, then, a temple celebrating Nature. The chapel gives thanks for Nature, not for Jesus Christ. The Christian symbolism here and there seems like a pastiche, a second thought. The light fittings become, like Judaism and Christianity, an imposition, an overlay, on a more universal religion, the veneration of Nature.

But here I must turn to another aspect altogether. Does the building work? Is it practical? Does it really support the natural environment it aims to venerate? I would argue not, and in this lies its greatest criticism. The glass walls, which show all the beauty of Nature, provide very little protection against the extremes of the weather. The building cannot be open during the winter months, because it cannot be effectively heated. In autumn and spring it is open, but the cost of heating is exorbitant. The walls are glazed with single panes of glass, which cannot maintain a stable temperature. The problem could have been foreseen and forestalled by the use of double or triple glazing, which would give a vacuum between the

panes to trap warm air. But Fay Jones did not do this. He used single glazing, as Frank Lloyd Wright had always done, even though modern building practices, available to him at the time of building, were clearly superior.

So climatically, the building doesn't perform. It is not really working effectively with the environment it pretends to celebrate. The architect seems to have been reluctant to take hold of modern materials available to him, and use them in innovative ways - a nice parallel here with attitudes within the modern church.

By way of summary, I would like to pose a number of questions which occurred to me while I was studying Thorncrowne. These questions were based on my experience of the building, but pertain to the wider church community:

**Question 1:** The chapel is beautiful, of that there is no doubt, but it also draws heavily on the ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright and on Japanese temple structures. Despite its remarkable beauty, there is a certain poverty of creative originality. It is one of the most important modern churches in America - so what does this say about the state of architectural creativity in America? Fay Jones is one of the most important American architects today, but he draws heavily on ideas developed many years ago, ideas that are in some cases obsolete.

**Question 2:** The labourers who constructed the actual building in 1980 did not have the skills and overall vision to see the full plan. They relied, of course, on a skilful architect to design and supervise it. To construct something as intricate and beautiful as this, you need good leadership and good design. Using this as an analogy for institutional structures within the modern church: how capable is the laity - the labourers, stonemasons, carpenters, etc - to deal with the organisation and maintenance of a world-wide religious institution? Will we always need a competent leader at the helm, as a building needs an able architect to design and build it? And if the leader is not competent and draws too heavily on outmoded ideas and practices, what sort of a building will we end up with?

**Question 3:** In referring to the past in its design, and yet attempting to be modern, Thorncrowne becomes a thing of beauty *and* confusion. It does not seem to be sure of its identity. Does this building know what it really is? And is its uncertainty a mirror of the confusion within modern Christianity, as it tries to decide just what *it* is?

I can give no clear answers to these questions. But at least they remain open to debate. They were raised, in my case, because of Thorncrowne. And so I heartily recommend a visit to this chapel, if ever you are in Arkansas, however unlikely it might seem. The outstanding beauty of the building and its surroundings will easily compensate for the long and winding road you take to get there.

