

The Urban Context of Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

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Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is located in Society Hill on Sixth and Lombard streets. Its rough beige stone-facade and brick body fit into the combination of row houses, low-rise apartment buildings and small store fronts that surround it. As one approaches the church on Sixth Street, a blue marker stands out identifying the building as a national historic site. A few yards down a weathered display tells the story of the man, Richard Allen, who founded the AME church on that spot in 1787. Although outwardly the physical structure blends with the surrounding neighborhood, in other ways the church is now an island in the middle of what has become a wealthy, white, neighborhood. This building which was once a pillar in the local black community has become a novelty trapped in a community that has no need for it. Mother Bethel can be understood more thoroughly in terms of its present relationship with the city, when viewed first in a historical context.

A Brief History

Mother Bethel is well known to Philadelphia's black community as a symbol of black achievement. The services the church provides are not as significant to the members of the black community as their pride in its history and symbolism. Familiarity with the church's basic history is thus vital to any discussion of the church and its functions today.

Richard Allen, the man who built the first Mother Bethel church also founded the entire African Methodist Episcopal denomination. Richard Allen was a slave whose master allowed him to buy his freedom after a Methodist preacher convinced the master of the evils of slavery. After being freed, Allen, who already attended Methodist services regularly, moved to Philadelphia and began to recruit other Africans to Methodism through his preaching. The Methodists had been favorable to the abolitionist cause and supported the freed blacks. However, as more blacks joined St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia opposition to their presence grew.

Opposition turned to hostility, and in November 1787 Allen and fellow preacher Absalom Jones led the blacks out of St. George's in the middle of service. In time the black congregation led by Allen and Jones founded their own church separate from the Methodists but still followed their basic tenants. Thus began the African Methodist Episcopal church.

Allen bought the lot where Mother Bethel stands in 1791. The lot has been continuously owned by the church ever since and is the oldest piece of land owned continuously by blacks in America (Klots 35). The first building to serve as a church on the lot was actually a blacksmith's shop purchased and moved by the members of Allen's congregation. The current Mother Bethel was built in the 1880's, its doors opened in 1890, and has served as the mother church of the African Methodist Episcopal church since that time.

Physical Description of the Building

The story of Richard Allen and his success in establishing a black church is a source of pride in the black community. From the exterior the building and the property itself are a monument to Allen and the history of the church that he founded. The interior the building serves as a museum dedicated to the memory of Allen and what he stood for. Although the building was not constructed for this purpose the physical structure has been altered to embrace its historical significance.

Mother Bethel AME church and its parking lot to the South take up one quarter of the block on Lombard between Fifth and Sixth streets. Only the facade of the building stands out in any way. It is constructed in three sections. In the first section a bell tower reaches up above the tops of nearby buildings identifying the edifice as a church. The middle section consists of an arched entryway with a three tiered stairway leading to three sets of large oak doors. The arch is repeated above the entryway, framing a stained glass window. A pediment tops the middle section drawing attention

to the entrance of the building. The third section resembles a small turreted tower. It has small windows and allows the other two sections to command the viewers attention. In addition to the markers of the Philadelphia Historical Society (mentioned in the introduction), embellishments to the facade include several plaques celebrating the churches rich history, and a small stained glass window in memory of Richard Allen. These signs and plaques serve to transform the exterior of the church from a simple facade into a meaningful monument.

The remainder of the building is constructed of brick matching the row houses on the streets to the North. The original stained glass windows are visible on the sides of the building although bulletproof glass clouds the images from the exterior. During the workweek the front doors are locked. The business entrance to the church is off the alley to the North. This shows some division of functional and monumental space.

While the exterior of the church serves as a monument, the interior is a museum. The sanctuary on the second floor was restored to its original form in 1991. Everything from paintings on the ceiling to the finishing of the pews is as it was in 1890 (with the exception of electric lighting and sound system). Even a recreation of the church's original carpet covers the floor. Pride in the detail of the restoration is undisguised. In her description of the restoration process the church historian, Ruby Boyd, discussed each element of the sanctuary in great length. She explained that, like the rest of the decorations in the sanctuary, the carpet's design was symbolic. The green and blue stars in a ratio of six to one represent the six days of creation and the seventh day which is the Sabbath.

Mother Bethel was modeled on a church now known as Joan's Tabernacle on Twentieth and Diamond. The designer and architect of both buildings was Ed Hazzelhurst. Interior and exterior follow the same general layout as the model church, however a lack of funds forced the congregation of Mother Bethel to cut back on part of the building. The congregation chose to include amenities and to skimp on areas where

the shortcuts could be hidden. Allen and his Methodists weren't going to let anyone see that they couldn't afford all the luxuries of the white churches. These cut backs had repercussions on the stability of the building and are visible from the interior of the church.

Red marbled columns holding up the balcony continue up to the ceiling where they support the arched vaulted wings of the sanctuary. The design of these columns and arches was faulty; no lateral support was given to the arches and they began to bow out. Metal tie-rods now span the tops of the four columns pulling the arches inward. The decision to make the building look good rather than be structurally secure was also a point of pride. Mrs. Boyd pointed out that even with the tie-rods the columns can be seen to lean slightly, reminding the congregation of the shortcuts that had to be made in the original structure.

Cutting back on structural elements allowed the church to be lavish in other ways. The three large stained glass windows above the balcony to the sides and back of the nave are full of symbolic designs. The bright colors of the windows are matched by the colors of the painting on the ceiling and front of the nave. The chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling is solid brass as are the lighting fixtures lining the edge of the balcony. The pews, alter rail, and pulpit are all made of cherry. Because of the museum like context, all these items, when viewed by the congregation or visitors, are charged with historical significance.

Although loaded with historical meaning the sanctuary is still functional church space. The basement of the building however has been turned into a museum, no longer a true part of the active church. The museum celebrates the lives of Richard Allen and his partner Absalom Jones and their struggle for the black community. The museum contains a mural, many paintings, pictures of all the ministers of the church, and various artifacts from the church's history. The pulpit and pews built by Richard Allen for the first church are displayed beside a tomb containing the remains of Richard

and Sarah Allen and Absalom Jones. This museum seems out of place in a church until one realizes that it is the history these items represent that makes the church more than just a congregation in the wrong neighborhood.

The lecture hall on the ground floor is open space used for church organizations and other public meetings. Fold up chairs are arranged in rows facing a movable pulpit. Bulletin boards line the walls. The space is clearly multi-functional. It looks as though it could be used for church school activities as well as adult bible studies and church luncheons. The church offices, also functional space, are on the ground floor too. They are located off a main corridor which leads to the side door of the church, the business entrance.

The conflict between functionality and historical significance that is so obvious in the building's structure is also visible in other aspects of the church, especially the social neighborhood.

The Church and Neighborhood Dynamics

The Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church sits incongruously within its urban context. While the history and beauty of the space may give it primacy in the immediate neighborhood, the makeup of the congregation does not match the makeup of the neighborhood surrounding the church. From the outside, the simple brick construction of the modern row houses complement Mother Bethel with its natural historic beauty and elaborate facade. Racially, economically, and spatially, however, the neighborhood and the church are living separate lives.

Mother Bethel was originally built because it was in the heart of Philadelphia's black community. Building the church at this location represented an "understanding of its mission to the black population" and facilitated the founder's "intention to serve the neighboring blacks fully" (Klots 37). Much has changed since that time. The

congregation is still predominantly black and the church itself remains a symbol of African-American struggle and accomplishment. The neighborhood, however, has changed dramatically, especially since gentrification in the 1960's, and has come to break its social connection with the church.

Race and economic status have been two outward characteristics that have created lasting barriers between the neighborhood and the church. From 1970 to 1990 the racial characteristics of the tract have been fairly static. In 1970, there were 4841 people living within the tract and 6.3% of this group were classified as "Negro." However, there were no other races listed in the census information, so it is possible that part of this group were of a different racial makeup. In 1990, of the 5671 people in the tract 150 were Asian and 180 were Black. This means that only 3% of the neighborhood was made up of non-whites and only half of that number were Black. This is particularly interesting for a church that was founded to serve the heart of the Black community of Philadelphia.

There is a similar deviance in the income levels of the neighborhood and the financial security of the church. Ruby Boyd mentioned several times that the congregation and the church were not wealthy. Recent renovations were accomplished only with the result of national concern for the mother church, aggressive fundraising, and help from outside organizations. Yet, the neighborhood within census tract 10 has a per capita income of \$53,715. The mean family income reaches over \$94,000. Overall, only 209 (3.6%) people in this tract are in poverty. Almost half of the people in poverty (98) are over 65¹ and only 5 are under the age of 18. Again, these statistics do not say anything about the building itself, but serve to represent the difference between the economic situation of the areas residents and that of the church.

¹ Poverty is determined by salary income and does not include equity of other sources including home ownership or savings. For people over 65 the ratio of income to other equity is lower. This can inflate the poverty statistics within the tract and misrepresent the true level of poverty.

Mother Bethel's relationship today with Society Hill is, for the most part, only spatial and historical. Along with a few shops, a Synagogue, and a park, the church's most prominent surroundings are residential. There are a few lower income housing blocks that were built after the city was sued for not providing such residences after gentrification. Other than that, the existing houses and apartments are the dwellings of a higher income level. In determining the social relationship between the church and the neighborhood one must realize that the Society Hill residences are not the homes of the church's congregation. As a neighbor pointed out, the church is "juxtaposed" within its surroundings. On the one hand, it is a compliment to the neighborhood as a reminder of history and as a cultivator of difference. In a social context, however, it is an active and predominantly black church within a "conservative" white neighborhood. The residents of the area do not attend its services, mingle with its congregation, or require its aid.

The church's Rev. Jeffrey N. Leath described Mother Bethel's relationship with its neighbors as "semi-professional." He explained that the neighborhood "includes" the church in its attempt to maintain the physical appearance of the area. The local civic association sends its mailings to the church office, and the church has had public concerts which some neighbors have attended. This, however, seems to be where the social relationship ends. As Mr. Eugene Baguskas, one of the church's neighbors, points out, a social relationship is not necessarily needed. Mr. Baguskas feels that if they had a common problem, the church and the neighborhood might work together. Because they do not appear to share problems, the church and the local residents maintain their distance.

Rev. Leath commented that the traditional role of churches as community makers and aid givers had been disrupted for Mother Bethel by its location in the city. Society Hill's financial stability nullifies the community's need for the church's social services. Moreover, the sense of community that churches often provide or maintain for a

neighborhood is eliminated because the surrounding population does not participate in the church activities. The church could also offer spiritual guidance to neighbors, however, because of their backgrounds, those who are Christian are probably not members of the AME denomination and therefore would not be likely to join Mother Bethel in worship. It is evident that Mother Bethel is not a "neighborhood church," its congregation come from diverse areas around Philadelphia including parts of Camden. Its draw is clearly a result of its history and the pride of its congregation. The church, therefore, is able to serve as a community for its congregation, although it is unable to serve as a bridge to the local residential areas.

Social and Commercial Service Space

Philadelphia's Mother Bethel AME Church is located near South Street, a popular destination for shopping and entertainment. As a result, the area's stores and boutiques offer a variety of commercial services. Among other attractions, visitors can browse a selection of books on holistic healing in the "Garland of Letters" bookstore at Sixth and South. Or they may try on tie-dye T-shirts and trendy hats at other locations, or eat Greek gyros and Italian stromboli in an international delicatessen. South Street markets eccentricity by offering numerous choices for its visitors -- accordingly, most of the area's entertainment options must be purchased.

The Society Hill Playhouse is currently presenting a live comedy called "Nunsense" at Eighth and South. However, no movie theater can be found nearby. This may be a result of South Street's desire to maintain an eccentric or alternative image -- mainstream movie attractions, available at many locations, do not fit South Street's ideal of a unique brand of entertainment. Consequently, there are not many movie theaters in the commercial areas of this neighborhood. The closest movie theater is nearly six blocks away, at Second and Walnut.

South Street businesses hope to lure people (and their money) from other parts of Philadelphia, perhaps even from other cities. Therefore public transportation is readily available. Municipal buses run along the boulevard, while Market East train station is only a ten minute walk away. Even closer is the PATCO High-Speed train to New Jersey, with a station on Ninth Street, three blocks north of South Street. In light of this, it is interesting to note that local grocery stores tend to be of the "mini-mart" variety, selling mostly processed and pre-produced snack foods for people on the go. The "8-11 Market" at Fifth and South is one such example.

Despite the fast-paced, mobile crowd that sustains an alternative culture in the area, South Street and Mother Bethel AME Church are nonetheless found in the midst of a residential neighborhood. Other services have been established locally to serve the non-commercial and everyday needs of the citizens. A larger grocery store, Super Fresh, can be found further west on South Street, near Tenth, where the trendy boutiques begin to thin out. Here, presumably, most local residents shop for staple groceries, items that may require more preparation in the kitchen than those offered in the convenience stores and eateries elsewhere on South Street.

Public services have also been established in the area. Engine #11 of Philadelphia's Fire Department is located at Sixth and South, one block from Mother Bethel. Though the station is at the wrong end of Sixth, a one-way street, public vehicles are allowed to travel in any direction in case of emergency. Thus, a fire at Mother Bethel would be answered by Engine #11. Even closer to the church, directly across the street, is the Starr Garden Recreation Center, with a playground, fields, and a general-use building for community activities. Most recently, Starr Garden has been preparing for a Halloween costume contest.

The Pennsylvania Hospital is located two blocks west of Mother Bethel, at Eighth and Pine; the nearest post office is located on Eleventh, near South Street. In addition, a police station services the area from a shopping center along South Street, near Ninth.

An officer on duty lauded the station's location, saying that it was the best place to oversee both the commercial and residential sectors of the neighborhood. It is situated slightly west of South Street's busier blocks, yet remains just one block south of private residences. The officer also identified the area's nearest social service agency -- a drug rehabilitation center on the 800 block of Lombard Street, one block north of South Street, and two blocks west of Mother Bethel. Further investigation revealed that the center was located in a relatively wealthy residential area, and was not identified by a sign. In fact, the building looked much like any other on Lombard Street. It may be that this rehabilitation agency was designed for those participants who are nearing the completion of treatment. Or possibly local resident and users of the clinic are not comfortable with an outward advertisement of its purpose.

While there are a myriad of opportunities within walking distance of Mother Bethel, church patrons may not want to participate in the activities of South Street or the local neighborhood. The counterculture of South Street may be inappropriate for members of the congregation after church hours, consequently it may seem off-limits to members of the commuting congregation. Moreover, since most of the church's members reside in other communities, they may not have use for the available public services -- hospital, fire station, schools, and so on. Thus, Mother Bethel seems detached from its local service sector. The church's constituents have little need for South Street's shops and local public agencies, while the building itself only requires physical protection from fire and crime, as well as electrical power from the city's grid.

Opportunities, Alternatives, and The Church

After speaking with people living in the neighborhood and older members of the church, one specific use of the building did not stand out as more beneficial than the church and its present functions. There is noticeably little contact between the church and the neighborhood because at this time there seems to be little need for interaction.

In addition, the pastor commented on how he thought that he could better serve the community in a location closer to the members and the populations they serve. Any change to alter the use of the building would involve the development of a stronger relationship between the community in the neighborhood and that of the church, or an actual displacement of the church to an area where it may be more beneficial to its members.

The Reverend finds it problematic to serve in a church that is segregated from most of its residents. It was evident that he wished for the opportunity to be more involved with the members of Mother Bethel. This would not be a reason to change the current use of the church, but to add a complementary building that may increase the efficiency of the services. The pastor mentioned that the neighborhood was not often bothered by the church gatherings because the members were unable to meet very often. This is due to the fact that members need to leave their area communities to meet together. For this reason the pastor suggested a small building, even a store front, where he could meet with needy populations more conveniently. Having church services and functions in an area close to many church members would intensify pride in the church. By combining neighborhood pride and pride in their church, overall participation in church functions could increase.

One idea given by Mr. Baguskas, a resident of the neighborhood, is that the neighbors do not feel welcomed by the church. Members of the church disagree, claiming that anyone can become a member. To increase neighborhood awareness of the church's feelings, church members must clarify their attitude towards area residents. It is possible that many community members expect hostility due to the changes that have occurred in the vicinity of the church. After visiting church services it was obvious that all are welcome, however, to improve its reception within the community, the church must make it public that all members of the community are welcome as visitors or members. The church was developed originally for African-Americans, and many

neighbors believe that this custom continues. Therefore, the church must clarify its ideals and its expectations within the community, and express willingness to give back to the neighborhood. For their part, the neighborhood residents must also be willing to open up and try a new experience by attending a service foreign to them.

The Mother Bethel Church stands out from its surroundings. It is usually unused, and when occupied it is by people that live in other neighborhoods. For this reason, area residents should be able to offer many uses for this space to replace the church. The neighbors, however, seem to respect the church and its history. With this respect in mind, it would make more sense to intensify the church's existing activities. There is no reason to eliminate a relationship that has succeeded despite these delicate conditions. It would be more productive to improve relations between the church and the surrounding community. This task will be made easier if parishioners can congregate in an area separate both from the neighborhood and their weekly services.

Bibliography

Klots, Steve. Richard Allen: Religious Leader and Social Activist. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991.