



A Minimalist Meditation

BY KARL KESSLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BEBEE

After the Second World War, the look of new landmark buildings changed dramatically from what had come before. Many buildings conceived early in the space age can seem to have fallen to Earth from out of the blue.

A striking local example, built in 1963, is the Keffer Memorial Chapel at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo – originally the seminary of Waterloo Lutheran University.

Outside, its four simple planes slope gently away from vertical to compose something of a truncated pyramid, an unusual building form evoking an ancient monument. This stark shape is grounded by warm, split sandstone facing that contrasts with the smooth limestone covering the rest of the modern, cloister-shaped complex.

Windows punctuate two walls in the typical ecclesiastical way, but these are very narrow, cutting the full height of the sandstone to connect with a continuous perimeter clerestory window running beneath the thin white scalloped roof. When the chapel is lit from within at night, this roof appears lifted from the walls, like the lid of a jewel box. Inside the box, however, is space, light and little else.

Practically a basilica – an ancient building type – the interior plan is similar to St. Peter’s Lutheran in Kitchener. In fact, both buildings were designed by Waterloo architect Karl Kruschen, who was born and trained in Germany.

Strong forms, restrained brickwork patterns and interesting fenestration are hallmarks of Kruschen’s designs, and all are evident at Keffer chapel. Physical division of space is negligible. Slender, plain floor-to-

ceiling columns hug the walls. The organ case and screened loft stairs are decorated with geometrical shapes in wood, some of the only ornament in this minimalist meditation.

The building plans were austere enough to prompt the 1963 design committee to call for measures that would “relieve the bareness” of the exterior and avoid a “stark and cold” interior. Even so, 55 years later the recent renovation by Montgomery Sisam Architects respects the worth and integrity of the original design.

Stripped bare to an almost crystalline form, a modern building like Keffer Chapel is an ornament in itself. But it is also informed by the past. No new design appears out of thin air. 

Karl Kessler is co-ordinator of Doors Open Waterloo Region.



THE
BEAUTY
NURSES.

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN TO THOSE WHO CHOOSE WATERLOO’S FACE,
SKIN AND BODY EXPERTS. JUST ASK OUR PATIENTS.

