

# Grand Avenue Temple

9th and Grand  
completed 1911-1912

by Elizabeth Rosin

The property historically associated with Grand Avenue Temple, located at the southeast corner of 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Grand Boulevard in the heart of Kansas City's business district, includes a Methodist church and a twelve-story office building. The pair was constructed in 1910-11 from designs by noted Kansas City architect John McKecknie. Listed on the National Register in 1985, the Greek Revival church and Neo-Classical office building represent a unique effort by the congregation of the Grand Avenue Methodist Church to secure the financial future of their institution and to perpetuate their mission of good works and community outreach.



In 1866, the year of its founding, a congregation of Kansas City Methodists purchased the property at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Grand Avenue, on which they built a church. The large, brick Gothic Revival church facing Grand Avenue was dedicated in 1870.

The Grand Avenue Methodist Church prided itself on welcoming newcomers and travelers to Kansas City. Described as the "Crossroads Church of America" and the "Church of Strangers," the congregation directed its outreach efforts to transient visitors as well as the permanent residents of nearby hotels and boarding houses. The Church also established programs that supported Kansas Citians in need, including the Helping Hand Institute and the Kansas City branch of Good Will Industries. The success of these efforts helped the Grand Avenue Methodist Church play a pivotal role in the spread of Methodism in Kansas City. Into the early twentieth century, the congregation, often described as the "Mother of Methodism" in Kansas City, spawned a series of new Methodist churches in the residential suburbs developing throughout the community.



As Kansas City grew during the late nineteenth century, the church's land became increasingly valuable. By the early 1900s, the heart of the Kansas City business hub shifted south from 5<sup>th</sup> Street

to 10<sup>th</sup> Street, and the area around the Methodist church evolved from a mixed-use neighborhood to a commercial business district. Responding to this change and the movement of the population to new suburban neighborhoods, many nearby churches sold their downtown property in favor of new locations closer to their congregants.

The Grand Avenue Methodist Church was deeply committed to its downtown mission. Instead of selling the property at 9<sup>th</sup> and Grand, the congregation elected to demolish the existing church and build a new church and office building on the property. The congregation anticipated that commercial rents from the office tower would generate an annual income of \$67,000, which could be used to fund church programs. Facing Grand Avenue, the office building would join the skyline of office towers growing along the commercial thoroughfare while creating a buffer for the church, which would occupy the lot to the east, facing 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

Although church leaders had suggested this idea as early as 1897, it was 1909 before the new commercial development downtown made the proposal feasible. Advances in construction technology around the turn of the twentieth century enabled the erection of increasingly taller buildings. By 1908, Kansas City boasted three modern skyscrapers. Two of these (the R.A. Long Building and the Scarritt Building) were located within a block of the church. When a New York investor offered a loan of \$375,000 for the project, the congregation elected to move forward with the plan. The old church was razed, and construction of the new building complex got underway in July 1910.

The building designs prepared by architect John McKecknie melded classical architectural forms and motifs with modern structural systems. The exterior of the blond brick church is a near replica of the Erectheum temple on the Acropolis of Athens, Greece. It features two-story columns and pilasters with full Ionic capitals. The columns divide the façade into five symmetrical bays and support a low, wide pedimented gable.

The interior is equally magnificent. Reinforcing the Greek Revival treatment of the exterior are plaster details, including composite capitals on the pilasters that rise the full height of the perimeter walls and egg-and-dart, rosette and dentil moldings found throughout the space. The church's reinforced concrete structure enabled McKecknie to design the sanctuary as a two-story amphitheater with arcs of oak benches filling the wide, column-free space. Stained glass windows in the north and east walls

as well as in a skylight illuminate the interior. But, perhaps the defining element of the interior is the E. M. Skinner Opus 190 pipe organ installed in the building in 1912. Notable in its own right, the organ is listed on the National Register of Historic Instruments.

To harmonize with the classical Greek motif of the church, McKecknie designed the adjacent office building with a building form and Neo-Classical styling common to other early twentieth-century office towers. Like its contemporaries, the Grand Avenue Temple Building featured a three-part design (base, shaft and cornice) that enhanced the building's feeling of height. The two-story base supports the main, unornamented shaft. The first story contained a series of retail storefronts each with large display windows. The second story is slightly more elaborate with rusticated stone walls and Chicago style windows (each opening filled with a fixed plate glass window flanked by single, double-hung sash). Prominent beltcourses mark the top and bottom of the nine-story building shaft. The building's top story received the most ornate treatment and expresses the building's style through brackets, dentils, and carved floral elements.

In their selection of John McKecknie to design the buildings, the congregation hired an architect at the forefront of the twentieth-century construction technology revolution. A pioneer in the use of reinforced concrete, McKecknie designed the Grand Avenue Temple buildings using an efficient combination of reinforced concrete and structural steel. The designs also display McKecknie's keen understanding of classical forms and motifs, honed during his employment with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and a five-month architectural tour of Italy.

In February 1912, just 18 months after groundbreaking, Bishop William F. Anderson traveled from Chattanooga, Tennessee to dedicate the new 1,500 seat church and the 12-story office building. The concept of erecting the office tower to support the church initially proved sound. Within five years, the church property was valued at \$1 million, making it one of the wealthiest congregations in the nation.

A decade later, however, the congregation's luck began to change. After World War I, downtown Kansas City experienced a period of rapid development that coincided with improvements in construction and office technology. Business tenants were eager to lease space in the most modern buildings available, and the Grand Avenue Temple building was often passed over in favor of newer buildings. As it became increasingly difficult to lease

the office tower, it became a financial burden to the congregation rather than an asset. Then, in 1924, descendants of the individuals who originally purchased the land for the church sued the Grand Avenue Temple for violating the terms of the land deed, which stated that the property was to be used for religious purposes only. The Missouri Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the church but not before the church incurred considerable financial expense. The final blow came in 1939, when the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company foreclosed on the outstanding loan balance and seized the property. Eventually, the congregation was able to buy back the church building when the bank lowered the asking price to \$20,000. The office tower remains under separate ownership.

Since the completion of construction in 1912, the buildings have experienced some physical changes. Around 1939 additional ornament in the pediment of the church was removed. It is not clear from the historic record when this occurred in relationship to the foreclosure and repurchase of the property. A series of improvements have also been made to the office building to maintain its marketability. In 1940, the most notable of these changes covered the original storefront transoms and replaced the original display windows. In spite of the changes to both buildings, the intrinsic relationship between them survives.

The congregation of the Grand Avenue Temple remains small but active and focused on its mission dedicated to improving the urban community.

#### **Sources:**

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