

## Historic Astoria Churches

By Jaime Lump for Our Coast Magazine, April 2023

From the marine layer blanketing the Columbia River to the tufts of fog hugging the fir trees in the hills, Astoria's natural beauty invokes pictures painted in a storybook, but credit for much of the city's distinct aesthetic is also due to its built landscape. A remarkable architectural talent has grown out of Astoria – varied in style but tied together by a homegrown tradition of community, spirituality, and sense of place. This talent is on display in Astoria's Lutheran churches, all of which are worth a visit for contemplation and appreciation of craftsmanship.

Lutheranism first appeared in the Pacific Northwest with the arrival of Scandinavian and German immigration in the 1870s, who immediately set about building places of worship. Since the late nineteenth century, Astoria has been home to several Lutheran churches, each a distinct product of the congregations' language and country of origin. Of the remaining, three stand out as terrific representations of 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural diversity cultivated by three prominent Astorian architects.

### Trinity Lutheran Church 588 16<sup>th</sup> Street (1938)

The Trinity Lutheran church was built during the town's historic period of development following the great 1922 fire, which destroyed many of the downtown structures. John E. Wicks, a well-known local architect, acted as a chief participant in the town's structural regrowth. During the first half of the twentieth century, Wicks designed dozens of Astoria's commercial and residential buildings, many of which still stand today. Among Wick's buildings is Trinity, where Wicks was a charter member and trustee. Wicks often incorporated principles from two architectural styles in his designs. With this church, Arts and Crafts elements including wood shingles and Gothic details, which are evident in the church's arched stained-glass windows, are seen wrapping the building. Trinity served both the Swedish and German Lutherans, who merged congregations in August of 1929, just weeks before the stock market crash. Despite the economic downturn, plans for the new church building progressed, and the congregation acquired land at 16<sup>th</sup> and Franklin on the former site of the 1890s Convent of Holy Names building. Town officials provided financing for the labor through a local Depression-era relief program called the "Astoria Plan," and Trinity's first service took place in 1938 on Christmas day.

The following year, the congregation purchased a 1916 Estey organ, comprising nearly 1,300 pipes. Even now, at more than a hundred years old, the organ produces a robust sound that fills the space inside the building's auditorium. In 1974, Clatsop Community College purchased the church and repurposed the building as a performing arts center. During this transitional period, the building lost some of its original church elements, including the bell tower, but it has retained much of its original structural façade, both within and without its walls. The building stands

today as the Charlene Larsen Center for the Performing Arts, where music continues to connect listeners to the generations of Astorians who came to Trinity to worship.

#### Zion Lutheran Church 565 12<sup>th</sup> Street (1953)

Astoria's development continued through the mid-twentieth century with many of its post-WWII buildings reflective of the new modern architecture styles, which promoted the idea that form should follow function. Amid this development came the Zion Lutheran church, which Ebba Wicks Brown designed for a Finnish congregation. Daughter of John Wicks and the second woman in Oregon to become a licensed architect by examination, Brown carried on the work of her father by designing new buildings in Astoria in the modernist style. Her influence for the church's appearance drew on the International Style, which emphasizes simple forms and clean lines. Brown began drafting designs for the building in 1946 amid a growing sense of postwar self-assurance, opting for materials like brick and concrete in order to reveal the honesty of the building's form. Nestled within the restrained exterior of brick and concrete are vivid panes of stained-glass, which artfully invoke the Scandinavian religious tradition of the church's original Finnish congregates. The panes, designed by the stained-glass studio of W.P. Fuller & Co in Portland, are a highlight of the church's simple form.

The Finnish congregation held its first service in Zion Lutheran, which is located at 12<sup>th</sup> and Exchange, on New Year's Day in 1951. The original building lacked the church's notable bell tower, which Ernest Brown, Ebba's husband, designed in 1958. Later, in 1974, worshippers of Zion Lutheran and Trinity consolidated into one congregation. The new congregation opted to stay in Ebba Wicks Brown's building under the new name of Peace Lutheran. Eventually, the Peace Lutheran congregation incorporated some of the physical elements of Trinity's church into the Zion building, hoisting Trinity's church bell to the top of their bell tower, and displaying one of Trinity's gothic stained-glass windows in their main entrance hall. Peace Lutheran still holds a weekly service, now supporting the congregation of First Lutheran, and it also operates as a preschool. Since the merge of Peace and First, Peace Lutheran changed its name to Peace First Lutheran to represent both congregations.

#### First Lutheran Church 725 33<sup>rd</sup> (1954)

After WWII, the Norwegian Lutheran congregation outgrew their original 1880s church building, and began raising funds for a new church. They sought the assistance of Astorian architect Eino "Ike" Isaacson, who is famous for his use of the modern Streamline style apparent in the downtown Maki Building and the local Senior Center. While Isaacson opted for a more traditional overall design for the Norwegian church, he imbued the building's ornamentation combining old style with his modernist tastes. For example, Isaacson incorporates a subtle 2-tiered roofline along the building's north side presenting a possible nod to Medieval Nordic church architecture. Above the nave, simple and ornate elements meet in the clean horizontal and

vertical lines of wooden planks that encase textured glass of various hues. At sunset, the abating light reveals the subtle violets and blues of the illuminated glass set within the repeating geometric motif ringing the building, casting a warm light over the congregation. The church also has a striking bell tower, a wooden column topped with a metal clad spire and cross, which catches Astoria's light and shines it back to visitors of the neighborhood church.

First Lutheran was dedicated in 1954, the same year Trinity celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and the year after Zion Lutheran church was dedicated. Today, the Peace First congregation continues its dedication to the space by holding weekly services, hosting community gatherings, and providing grounds for a community garden.