

SQUARE SHADOWS
(Gloria Dei Lutheran Church)
6024 Butler Pike
Whitemarsh ~~Township~~
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6025

HABS
PA
46-WHIM,
7-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: 6024 Butler Pike, Whitmarsh Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: This home, designed by renowned architect George Howe in the 1930s, was one of the earliest successful attempts to combine the materials of traditional home construction with elements of the International Style. It marks one of the important steps in Howe's transition from Beaux-Arts-influenced designs to the International Style.

Description: Square Shadows sits two hundred yards to the southwest of Butler Pike in an area that is gradually moving from farmland to suburban development. The original two-story structure was an elongated rectangle running northwest to southeast, with one wing extending southwest from the northern end and another traveling northeast from just below the center of the rectangle. The driveway approaches the house from the north, looping around before returning to Butler Pike.

Much of the original 1934 building, as with many older estate homes in the area, is built of Chestnut Hill limestone and red brick. Howe, however, also used more modern materials: concrete for the lintels, lally columns supporting the concrete terraces on the west (rear) side. This use of technology is one illustration of the influence of the International Style; another is the fenestration. Both the design of the windows--large rectangular lights framed by black-painted steel--and their locations--most corners have a large expanse of glass--reflect architectural developments in the 1920s. Yet a third borrowing appears in the plan: Howe's design, which massed a series of offset rectangles, creating multi-planar facades.

The main entrance is located on the main block, northwest of the intersection with the northern wing. The interior, especially on the first floor, reflects the idea of asymmetrical but flowing space. In the entrance hall is the most striking element of the house, a freestanding semicircular staircase whose teak-veneered wood railings support the weight of the structure. Other important details included a series of folding screens that divided the dining room and an ebonized mantle above the living room fireplace. Howe worked with decorator Jeanne de Lanux in choosing interior materials. Family spaces such as bedrooms and the living room face the west, giving them a view of the wide lawn that originally extended in that direction.

The integrity of the home has declined since the original owners sold the property in 1953. Following its purchase in 1955, the Gloria Dei Lutheran Church has made a series of alterations.

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During its first decade of ownership the congregation created a chapel by replacing the living room window with a solid wall and enclosing the second floor gallery. Several bedrooms became offices, while the church-run school used others for classrooms or apartments for its teachers. A one-and-one half story wood frame parsonage was added on the property's eastern corner in 1962.

In the past twenty-five years there have been increasingly dramatic changes. In 1970 the church added an eight-sided polygonal wood-frame, brick-faced 4900 sq. ft. chapel to its north facade. Later that decade water leaking through the entryway roof stained the original paneling, which was subsequently covered with more, lower-grade paneling. Much of the lawn has disappeared, either because the forest has encroached or because the pre-schools which rent space from the church have built playgrounds. Most significant was the 1988 addition of a one-story 2000 sq. ft. modular classroom to the west facade. Extending from the former living room, it resembles a mobile home on a concrete foundation.

History: George Howe's original 1927 design for Square Shadows was, in the words of owner William Stix Wasserman, "a typically Georgian mansion." Howe had become well-known for country estate homes in this style, what he later dismissed as "Wall Street pastoral." Around this time, however, his style had begun to change. In 1929 Wasserman introduced Howe to William Lescaze, a Swiss-trained architect who greatly admired Le Corbusier and the International Style. The two men became partners, soon creating the final design for the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society Building (1926-32), generally considered America's ~~the~~ first modernist skyscraper.¹

Also in 1929, they created a series of modernist plans for the Wasserman house. The Great Depression caused Wasserman to delay the project for two years, beginning in 1930. He then re-hired Howe, whose partnership with Lescaze had quickly soured. Howe's final design borrowed much of its massing and plan from a scheme Lescaze had created in 1929. The most significant changes were in the placement of the wings coming off the main block and in the introduction of more stone and Virginia brick on the exterior.

¹ Stern, George Howe, 162. James F. O'Gorman et al, Drawing Toward Building: Philadelphia Architectural Graphics, 1732-1986 (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1986), 209-210.

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Square Shadows has never received the same attention as homes by other modernist architects such as Louis Kahn. Yet Robert A.M. Stern has argued:

The importance of Square Shadows lies in two directions: first, as a protest against the skin-deep formalism of the Machine Style; second, as the first important exploration on the part of a modern architect in America of the possibilities inherent in the materials rather than the forms of vernacular architecture.²

Despite these advances, of Howe's many designs Square Shadows "is his least well known and least appreciated."³

The house turned out to be one of the last single-family homes Howe designed. The homes he did create after 1934, most notably Fortune Rock in Maine (1937-39), also combined elements of the International Style with traditional materials. Howe's other projects before his death in 1954 were mainly office buildings more completely in the International Style.

During World War II the Wasserman family moved to Washington, renting the house until 1953, when they sold it along with five acres to Rosabelle and Stephen Deichelmann. The new owners apparently acquired the property for investment purposes; soon after purchase they began requesting zoning variances from the Whitmarsh Planning Board. The first, which was denied, would have made the building a Temple University research facility. The second, which although approved was never executed, would have divided Square Shadows into four apartments.⁴

In August 1955 the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church bought the building as a home for a new congregation and school. Though the congregation was originally small, by 1970 membership had grown sufficiently so that the church built the chapel addition,

² O'Gorman, 209-210; Stern, p. 163-166

³ Stern, 163. Stern points out that Square Shadows received only two major write-ups: "Square Shadows," Architectural Forum 62 (March 1935), 195-205; James Ford and Katherine Morrow Ford, The Modern House in America (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1940), 61-62.

⁴ Montgomery County Deed Book 2436, p. 498 (30 December 1953); Whitmarsh Township Zoning Appeals 54-10 (10 June 1954) for apartments; #22-54 (4 March 1954) for Temple research.

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which opened in 1971. The Gloria Dei Lutheran Church School originally enrolled kindergarten through fourth grade, with another grade added each of the next four years. Later the seventh and eight grades were dropped, and in 1977 the school closed because of declining enrollment.⁵

In the 1982 the Church attempted to rent some of its space to a charitable foundation, but Whitemarsh Township denied its zoning appeal. Instead, for the next four years Gloria Dei rented space to the Norristown Montessori School. In 1987 the Whitemarsh Montessori Children's House began leasing space; in 1988 they added the modular classrooms to the rear.⁶

Sources:

Ford, James and Katherine Morrow Ford, *The Modern House in America*, New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1940, 61-62.

Montgomery County Deed Book 2436, p. 498, 30 December 1953.

O'Gorman, James F., et al. *Drawing Toward Building*: Philadelphia Architectural Graphics, 1732-1986, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 209-210.

"Square Shadows," *Architectural Forum*, vol. 62, March 1935, pgs. 193-205.

Stern, Robert A.M. *George Howe: Toward a Modern American Architecture*, New Haven, 1975, esp. 162-169.

Whitemarsh Township Zoning Appeals 54-10, 10 June 1954 for apartments; #22-54, 4 March 1954 for Temple research.

Historian: William Wright, Summer 1994

⁵ The church bought the house and ten acres of land, since in 1954 the Deichelmanns had purchased an additional five acres from the Wassermans. Montgomery County Deed Book No. 2502, p. 97; Montgomery County Title, Book No. 2606, p. 511; 6024 Butler Pike File, Whitemarsh Zoning Department, Lafayette Hill, PA.

⁶ Zoning Appeals #82-20, #88-31, 6024 Butler Pike file, Whitemarsh.