

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

ST. CASIMIR CHURCH COMPLEX

I. NAME

Historic: St. Casimir Church Complex
Common: Same

II. LOCATION

Street Address: 2604, 2618 and 2626 North Bremen Street and 924 East Clarke Street

Tax Key Number: 321-2108-112 and 321-2108-113

Legal Description:

WECHSELBERG & MANN'S SUBD IN SW 1/4 SEC 16-7-22 ALL OF BLOCK 2 SD SUBD & VAC ALLEY ADJ & LOTS 1 THRU 8 BLK 2 & VAC ALLEY ADJ IN PARKER'S SUBD & LOT 10 & S 14' LOT 7 BLK 2 & VAC ALLEY ADJ IN FRANKE'S SUBD

III. CLASSIFICATION

District

IV. OWNER

St. Casimir's Parish
2618 North Bremen Street
Milwaukee, WI 53212

Our Home Foundation, Inc.
2571 North Farwell Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53211

V. YEAR BUILT:

School: 1893-94
Rectory: 1894
Church: 1899-1901
Convent: 1923-24

Architects:

School: Henry Messmer
Rectory: Henry Messmer
Church: Erhard Brielmaier & Sons
Convent: Gurda & Gurda

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The St. Casimir's Church Complex is located in a working class 19th century residential area of modest frame or brick houses built between 1885 and about 1915. Small corner stores and taverns are situated on corner lots throughout the area. The church complex occupies the south one-third of the block bounded by North Bremen, North Weil, East Clarke, and East Center Streets. The principal structures are the church, the school, the convent and the rectory.

The church, built between 1899 and 1901 to the designs of Erhard Brielmaier & Sons, is sited close to the sidewalk at the northeast corner of Bremen and Clarke Streets, facing Bremen Street. It is a massive, cream brick, Victorian Gothic style structure with stone and sheet metal trim resting on a rusticated stone base. The roof is covered in cement asbestos tiles. The west façade facing Bremen Street is composed of a lofty gabled central section containing the ornately enframed tripartite main entrance vestibule above which is a very large traceried stained glass window surmounted by a statue of St. Casimir set in a niche.

Flanking the gabled central façade are two square Gothic towers of unequal height. The north tower is 130 feet high surmounted by a small, rectangular open belfry with a tall pyramidal cross-tipped spire. The belfry is particularly distinctive because it is set at an angle on top of the flat roofed lower stages of the tower almost as if it was a separate structure added as an afterthought. The south tower is 200 feet high and is composed of numerous buttressed stages accented with extensive brick corbelling, stone belt courses and dressings, and a wide variety of window types. Above the louvered, fourth-stage belfry is a four-sided clock. Above the clock tower stage the tower is topped by a faceted, cross-tipped spire set in a tall, octagonal drum with Gothic traceried sash.

The north and south elevations are nearly identical. The principal feature of each is a lofty, gabled transept with large, Gothic-traceried sash and deep corbelling at the raking cornice. The transepts are joined to the tower by the low buttressed side aisle walls with their three bays of tall, traceried stained glass windows.

The east elevation features a windowless, faceted apse. The deep corbelled cornice is the principal decorative feature.

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The school, built in 1983-94 to designs of architect Henry Messmer, is located behind the church at 924 East Clarke Street. It is a rectangular, three-story, asphalt-shingled, hip-roofed, cream brick building with a rusticated limestone basement. The south-facing façade of the Victorian Romanesque style building is composed of six bays of plain, segmental arched one-over-one windows flanking the gabled central entrance section. At the second story, over the arched entrance with its oversized gabled, brick surround, is an arched Diocletian window surmounted by a stone name plaque. Above that, three, tall, attenuated arched windows extend above the cornice line in a gabled wall dormer decorated with a crocketed finial at the peak. The east and west elevations each have various sizes of windows arranged to respond

to floor plan requirements. At the third floor of each, a central, gabled wall dormer similar to the one facing Clarke Street, rises through the cornice. Several of the windows on the east elevation have been bricked-up. At the rear of the school is a two-story, flat-roofed, cream brick addition of utilitarian design built in 1910 to the designs of architect Herman J. Esser.

The Rectory at 2618 North Bremen Street was built in 1894 to the designs of architect Henry Messmer. It is a late Queen Anne style, rectangular, 2 1/2 story, cream brick and stone trimmed structure resting on a resticated limestone base. Its roof is clad in cement asbestos tile. The symmetrical façade facing Bremen Street is composed of a central wooden entrance porch, now glazed, flanked by large double-hung windows with wide stone lintels. The massive gable with its modillion raking cornice is fenestrated with a bank of three, one-over-one windows unified within a classical enframing ornamented with four slender colonnettes.

The Convent at 2626 North Bremen Street was built in 1923-24 to the designs of Milwaukee architects Gurda and Gurda. It is a rectangular, two-story, brown brick, red terra-cotta tile, hip-roofed, Mediterranean style structure resting on a high, banded-brick basement. The façade faces west to Bremen Street. The three-bay façade is composed of a central, gabled, projecting brick vestibule flanked by two bays of paired, six-over-six, leaded glass, double hung windows. The first story windows are grouped under a blind arch inset with a rondel.

The south elevation is composed of two, three-story, projecting pavilions that rise through the eaves as gabled wall dormers. Between these pavilions are three bays of paired windows, with a gabled brick dormer centered on the roof.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The St. Casimir's Church Complex is architecturally significant as a fine example of a late Victorian Roman Catholic parish grouping that has survived nearly without alteration. St. Casimir's Church itself is an interesting example of the Victorian Gothic design work of the notable ecclesiastical architectural firm of Erhard Brielmaier and Sons.

VIII. HISTORY

In the 1870's a sizable Polish immigrant community became established on the east side of Milwaukee in the vicinity of Brady Street where St. Hedwig's Church was built to serve their spiritual needs. By the 1890's, the Polish community had spread north and west of the Brady Street area to the west side of the Milwaukee River above North Avenue. This populous neighborhood was so remote from St. Hedwig's that efforts began in 1893 to establish a new parish. Father Giles Tarasiewicz was appointed to organize the new congregation. About 300 families agreed to join the new church, but it soon became apparent that the most pressing need was for a parochial school to educate the Polish youth. Several lots were purchased and construction began on the present school building, which was completed in 1894. It housed not only the parish school, but also the living quarters of the nuns who taught there, and the gymnasium served as a church for the congregation. A rectory was built about the same time.

Within a short time the congregation doubled in size and a campaign began to erect a church. In 1899 the present church site was purchased and Erhard Brielmaier and Sons were hired to design the structure. In December of 1899 the cornerstone for the new edifice was laid. By the fall of 1901 the building was finished. The 117-foot by 76-foot wide structure was designed to seat 1,200.

Over the years the parish continued to grow. The last major building project was the construction in 1923-24 of a convent for the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who taught at the parish school. The congregation reached its peak size in the 1920's and remained stable until the 1950's when it began to decline in numbers. The school closed in the 1970's due to declining enrollment and a shortage of teachers. It is now used as a day care center. The convent was put to use as a retreat house about 1980 and later sold for use as a community-based residential facility. The rectory and church are still used by the congregation.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the St. Casimir's Roman Catholic Church Complex, 2600, 2618 and 2626 North Bremen Street and 924 East Clarke Street, be designated as a City of Milwaukee Historic District as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-1, e-5 and e-6 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-8 (2)(e), of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

Retain the original roof shape. Dormers, skylights and solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces of the rectory, convent or school if they are not easily visible from the street. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch. Retain the historic roofing materials on the convent, church and rectory if at all possible.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted brick, terra cotta or stone should not be painted or covered. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- b. Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed.
- c. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting brick, terra cotta or stone surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration and accumulation of dirt on the exterior of the building. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone or terra cotta.

- d. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed.

2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that are inappropriate or were unavailable when the building was constructed.

C. Windows and Doors

1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panes, sash, surrounds and sills, except as necessary to restore to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes. Avoid changing the size or configuration of windowpanes or sash.
2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements. Avoid the filling-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as brick or glass-block. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building. The leaded glass windows in the church should not be altered or removed except for restoration.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

There should be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design and appearance.

E. Additions

All of the elevations of the church building are integral to the structure's architectural significance. Additions are not recommended and require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevation. Additions may be made to the east elevation of the rectory and convent and to the north elevation of the school, subject to Commission approval.

F. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building.

G. Site Features

New plant materials, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building.

H. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that new construction be designed so as to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the historic buildings.

1. Siting

New construction must respect the historic siting of the historic buildings. It should be accomplished so as to maintain the appearance of the old building from the street as freestanding structures in a landscaped setting.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk, the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof, and individual building components such as overhangs and fenestration that are in close proximity to a historic building must be compatible to and sympathetic with the design of that structure.

3. Form

The massing of new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the old buildings as distinct freestanding structures. The profiles of roofs and building elements that project and recede from the main block should express the same continuity established by the historic structure if they are in close proximity to it.

4. Materials

The building materials that are visible from the public right-of-way and in close proximity to the historic buildings should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions, and combinations of cladding materials used on those structures. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.